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A U T U M N

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**BY THE SAME AUTHOR**

**EARTH**

**THE INDIVIDUAL**

**APRIL PANHASARD**

**HALF IN EARNEST**

**THE MAN WITH THE  
DOUBLE HEART**

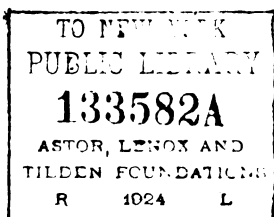
# AUTUMN

BY

MURIEL HINE  
(MRS. SIDNEY COXON)


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TO  
MY BROTHER  
MAJOR T. G. MACAULAY HINE

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A U T U M N



# AUTUMN

## CHAPTER I

RELUCTANTLY Deirdre awoke from a dream of fields and flowers. On her cheeks was a delicate flush of health, and she rubbed her eyes with a childish gesture, aware of a dancing disc of light—the reflection from the looking-glass of an inquisitive ray of sunshine.

Sleepily she watched it dart in its merry will-o'-the-wisp course round the barely furnished room and across the ceiling.

How it danced! . . .

A sudden breeze through the open window lifted the blind, and the hot glare of a June day leaped into her face.

She sat up, blinking, and glanced at the clock. The hands were motionless, pointing to four. It must have stopped in the night—she decided—her ears meanwhile on the alert for a movement in the flat.

From the Earl's Court Road below came the rumble of traffic; a heavy bus floundering past and the shrill insistent sound of a whistle blown to attract a taxi.

Beneath this throbbed a recurring refrain. A hawker crying aloud his wares in a hoarse but musical voice:—

"All a-growing and a-blowing! Plants. . . . Ferns. . . . Palms. . . . *Flow-ers!*"

"I'm sure it's late." Deirdre's arms, bare to the elbow, white and rounded, went up to her head and she tossed back her hair which fell in a red-brown cloud about her.

Then, with a quick movement, she threw off the bed-clothes and slipped to the floor, her slender feet seeking instinctively for a pair of slippers which, with the waywardness of inanimate things in a moment of haste, had hidden beneath the valance.

At last she unearthed one. Content with this, she hopped across the dingy carpet to the dressing-table in search of her watch.

Her eyes of that clear gentian blue which turns violet at night glanced impatiently across the scattered trifles: the well-worn ivory brushes that had been hers as a girl, a little trinket box of faded morocco and the odds and ends of her simple toilet.

"Ah!" she gathered up the wristlet and turned it over. "Nine o'clock!"

For a moment she stared at the dial aghast, horrified by her discovery.

"Wherever can Day be? It's breakfast time! And Mark will be getting so cross—he hates unpunctuality!"

Then with a resolute movement she twisted up her hair into a knot on the crown of her head and, reaching across to the wall, pressed the bell.

Even now, with this unbecoming coiffure, the freshness of her skin, the red and sensitive mouth and the low forehead, as yet unmarked by lines, were not without beauty—a beauty fully matured where youth still lingered, poignant, sweet.

A gentle tap came at the door. The maid entered the room: a little creature with a pale, pointed face and clever eyes, wide-open, of a full and lustrous grey.

"Good morning, mum!" She smiled as she spoke. "Many happy returns of the day! I thought, seeing it was your birthday, mum, and the master not getting up, I'd let you sleep on."

Deirdre's face relaxed.

"Not getting up?" she caught at the phrase. "You're a wicked woman, Day! It's past nine o'clock. And what about Cook?"

"I've seen to that, mum. It's all arranged." She spoke with a little air of triumph. "There's nothing to worry about, so do go back to bed and have your tea comfortable like."

Her mistress laughed. "No—I'll drink it here." She sat down in a basket chair, whilst Day arranged on a table beside her the tray with its steaming cup and a large full-blown rose thrust into the narrow neck of a

vase. "What a lovely flower! Is this a present from you? I'd quite forgotten it was my birthday."

"Well, mum, it's part of it." Day looked mysterious, but Deirdre's thoughts had flown elsewhere.

"Did Mr. Caradoc tell you not to call him?"

"He pinned a paper up outside his door, mum."

Deirdre nodded.

"He was late last night?"

"Yes'm."

The maid bustled about the room with a light, quick step that breathed of energy, shaking out the scattered clothes and gathering up articles needed for the bath.

"The water's nice and hot, mum, there's no cause to hurry. I'll just bring in your letters—" she disappeared.

Deirdre sipped her tea thoughtfully.

"Thirty-five to-day. . . . I'm getting old! And yet I don't *feel* different. It's very perplexing." Her eyes grew wistful beneath their long lashes. "I almost wish I did! It would make life easier—less blank somehow—to have quite done with youth. Perhaps it's because I have no child?"

Absently she rearranged the rose, giving the crushed stalk room to expand.

"One gets self-centred. Though I can't picture Mark as a proud parent—not at his age! He hates noises so; it would have a cramped existence, poor little soul!—not allowed to laugh. Then, the expense! No, it wouldn't have done, it's a hard enough struggle as things are."

She shook off the faint regret deliberately and was smiling again as the maid came back with the morning's post and a little flat parcel which she laid on the table by Deirdre's side.

"What is this?" Deirdre broke the string and found within the paper some handkerchiefs with a birthday card on which was inscribed in careful writing:—

"To my dear Mistress, from yours respectfully,  
Day."

"How very pretty—spoiling me again! Thank you *so* much," she held out her hand.



The maid took it shyly in her work-worn one.

"It's nothing, mum! I worked the initials—and they'll do for mornings—you was getting very short."

"I should think not indeed. I shall keep these for *best!*" Deirdre fingered the fine lawn lovingly.

A bell rang sharply through the flat.

"The master!" Day was off. "I'll be back in a minute, mum."

Mrs. Caradoc turned to her letters.

"She is a good soul—utterly devoted! I don't know what I should do without her."

She frowned as she opened the topmost envelope. "Another bill, I'm sure. Yes, it's for coal. And a begging circular—'Holiday Fund for Workers.' Well—I'm one myself!—and I can't afford this year to go away for a change. But there's never a charity for the *middle* classes. We pay all round and get no return."

The last document was a catalogue for a sale at Barker's, headed: "Astounding Reductions."

"I daren't look at it." Deirdre tossed it aside. "Shabby I am and shabby I'll remain. Besides at thirty-five I ought to take to black!" Her mouth twisted into a whimsical smile. "A nice birthday budget! I think I'll get up now."

She threw on a kimono and proceeded to the bathroom. There she found Day turning off the taps.

"It's quite ready, mum. Is there anything more? I'm just running across to the dairy for a couple of new-laid eggs. There's none in the flat and the master says he don't feel like herrings this morning."

Mrs. Caradoc sighed.

"And only on Tuesday I ordered eggs and he sent you out for fish!"

Day nodded, her grey eyes wise.

"Yes'm—but I think 'tis best to humour him."

Her glance conveyed a warning which her speech withheld.

"I see. Very well." Deirdre understood. Mark Caradoc's temper was no secret in his home. "For goodness' sake, see they *are* new-laid——" A youthful gleam of mischief lit up her face.

"Fresh from the hen, mum," said Day demurely.

Deirdre's thoughts ran on as she splashed in her bath.

"It's the only way: to treat it as a joke. No servants would stay with us otherwise. And the faithful Day never takes advantage; that's the comfort . . . and the miracle!"

Half an hour later she was in the dining-room, making the tea, neat and trim in her home-made blouse and dark serge skirt, which moulded her still-slender rounded figure.

The pink rose was tucked in her belt and its full-blown glory seemed to accentuate all that was rare and fine in the wearer.

As she added the last spoonful of tea and poured in the water from the copper kettle, the door opened and Caradoc came in. Broad-shouldered, tall and fair, he moved languidly, a fine figure of a man for all his forty-nine years. The small head well set on his powerful neck was crowned with smooth thick hair of a pale reddish gold.

Women admired Caradoc immensely, yet his friendships with them rarely lasted. Temperamentally he was cold, and after the first fleeting amusement of a new flirtation he quickly tired, too indolent to pursue his conquest further.

When he was bored he showed it at once—a sin that society rarely forgives—and many people suspected his temper which had left its mark on his handsome face.

To-day the warning signs were there.

Deirdre, glancing up quickly, saw in the grey eyes a glint of something cruel and the set lines of his full-lipped mouth. An air of gloom hung about him—a menace as though the slightest thing would precipitate the storm. But she nodded her head with a smiling welcome.

"Good morning, dear. What a lovely day!"

This was her method—the only chance of peace!—to ignore his darker moods and tide over the hours in which she could not actually avoid his presence.

He nodded back without speaking and took his place

facing her at the breakfast table. Then, turning round, he stretched out his arm and jerked down the blind impatiently.

"If you feel the sun, would you like to sit here?" She pointed to a chair on her right.

"I wish you wouldn't worry me!" He bit out the words. "I know what I want—I'm not a child!"

Deirdre's face went rigid with an effort at control.

Caradoc lifted the cover of the dish that lay before him.

"*Herrings!*" His voice breathed disgust.

"Day is bringing some eggs for you. It was no use cooking them until you were ready."

"Oh!" He glanced up at the clock, then lolled back moodily in his chair.

"Here is your tea." She passed him the cup, stretching her arm far out to meet his half-hearted response.

The silence prolonged itself.

"D'you want one of these?" he asked at length pointing to the fish.

"Please." Her answer was serene but beneath the table she clenched her hands.

Of late, during the heat wave, her nerves had troubled her and she felt at times a wild desire to ease the strain of the burden she bore by sharp retorts—the contempt she felt for the boorish manners he reserved for his home. But she knew it would be fatal and she herself lose strength. Her pride kept her up when the flesh was weak.

In the early days of their married life scenes had been frequent; for, even then, under the spell of genuine passion he could not control his besetting sin. Deirdre had learnt to her cost that habit is stronger even than love and can work the undoing of the latter.

A spoilt child, his mother's weakness with him had sown the seeds which were to bring forth those thistles on the stony path of another woman then unborn.

Now Deirdre forced herself to eat the food before her and to turn her thoughts towards the simple plans for the day. A memory of the bill for coal rose up and her lips twitched. This was hardly the time to produce it!

Day came in with a fresh dish and hot plate and laid

them down noiselessly before her master, her gaze averted, her mouth tight.

Caradoc roused himself. He ladled out a poached egg and sat staring down at it. Then, with his fork, he prodded the toast.

"Tough—of course!" He darted a glance across at his wife, but Deirdre now was sheltering behind the folds of the paper.

"Damned bad cook!" she heard him mutter.

Silence again, heavy, complete. The drawn blind over the window prevented what air there was from entering. The tension seemed unbearable, like the suspense of waiting for thunder.

"Ten long years of *this*"—she thought, biting her lips—"all my youth and now it's gone! What is left in the years ahead—when I'm really old and ugly and broken?" A sob rose into her throat. She choked it down desperately. "It's all very well to pretend outside that I don't care, but it's such a life! Work—work—work—economise. Try to be brave and cheerful and good. Go without all that women expect—pretty rooms and clothes and flowers! I wouldn't care if in my home I had companionship and love."

Her husband's voice made her jump.

"Is there any more tea?" It sounded aggrieved.

"Yes." Her answer seemed to her to come from somewhere far away. With a great effort she mastered herself. "Plenty." She laid the paper down.

He came across to fetch his cup, greedy eyes on the folded sheet.

"Don't wait if you've done. I'd rather be alone this morning." With that he gathered up the paper.

The half surly words of dismissal angered her, against her will.

"Well, here's something else for you to read." She handed him the coal merchant's bill.

"Eh—what? What's *this*?"

She was at the door. As she slipped through she heard the storm break behind.

"This damned flat! *Eats* money . . . ! *Three Pounds*? . . . I won't pay it. There's waste somewhere!

You'll have to stop it. D'you *hear*? D'you think I'm made of gold?"

"No, I don't," said Deirdre, as she vanished down the narrow passage. But she spoke the retort beneath her breath. "You're made of clay—common clay!"

She had reached her room with the final words.

Day was there, busily dusting. After a moment's hesitation the faithful maid went on with her task.

"In case he follows her," she thought. Then out aloud, as she bent down to straighten the rug before the hearth,—*"It's going to be scorching hot to-day. I hope you'll get out early, mum. A breath of air would do you good."*

"Yes." Deirdre welcomed the thought. She pinned on her hat hurriedly, with hands that, for all her courage, shook. "I'll go now. I've the books to change at the library." She caught them up, with her gloves and purse, and glanced for a second down the passage.

"I'll let you out, mum," said Day quickly. She followed her mistress; a little, grim, determined figure, true as steel.

As they passed the dining-room a voice, loud and angry, followed them.

"That you, Deirdre? Look *here*——"

But the pair had already reached the entrance. Quickly, Day unlatched the door and closed it with a sigh of relief behind the well-beloved form. Then she answered the summons herself.

"No, sir. It's me—Day. Is there anything I can do for you? The mistress has just gone out."

She stood there coolly, facing him, the light of battle in her face.

"No! Yes—you can clear away." He scowled at her, his eyes bloodshot. "And be quick about it." He added sharply.

"Yes, sir."

But she took her time. In her loyal heart, she said to herself:

"On her birthday, too! the poor lamb. I can't think why men was made!"

Caradoc moved across to the window, the coal bill

still clutched in his hand. Every now and then his lips moved. He was muttering to himself.

Day caught the angry murmur.

"He's just like the folk in the Bible as was possessed by a devil," she decided, pleased by this flight of fancy. "He ain't hardly safe to be with when he gets into one of his tantrums! I wonder the mistress don't break down. It's enough to ruin a woman's health. That it is! I wouldn't stand it. I'd have taken this to him long ago!"—she handled the bread-knife lovingly.

"Yes, sir. Did you speak?"

Silence.

She went out, rattling the tray.

## CHAPTER II

THE telephone bell rang sharply. Deirdre answered the call.

"Yes. Who is it?"

A voice came back, high-pitched and artificial. "Mrs. Hardwick. I want to speak to Mr. Caradoc. Is he in?"

"No, I'm afraid my husband's out."

"Oh, is that you, Mrs. Caradoc? How are you in this heat? Isn't it *dreadful*?—Just like August! It's simply ages since we met, but then the season's such a *rush*! I've only just got back from Henley—a week-end with the Studys—and the motor broke down coming home. I'm *frightfully* late and quite worn-out! I really think these week-end visits are a *mistake*, don't you? On the go from morning to night—and late hours—and then the *tips*!" A frivolous laugh followed the speech. "It's more expensive than an hotel! And now I find a letter waiting from a man who was dining here to-night and playing bridge afterwards—just two tables, that's all!—to say that his father's taken ill and he's going North. It's *so* annoying."

The speaker broke off for breath, but before Deirdre could answer she was off again, the wire buzzing.

"I wondered if Mr. Caradoc—he's so *kind*, isn't he?—if he's not engaged, would fill the gap? It would be very good of him and pretty Mrs. Lambart's coming—he admires her, doesn't he? What a pity *you* don't play! Why don't you, dear Mrs. Caradoc?"

"Because I can't afford it," thought Deirdre, but out aloud she made the excuse, "I really find no time for it."

"Of course not," the speaker's sigh suggested a faint hint of relief. "With your painting—I'd quite forgotten that. How I *envy* you! Such a gift. But I'm not talented at all—a 'butterfly' Cecil calls me! Well, will you *spare* your husband to me?—*just* for one evening! Do say you will!"

"I'm sure he'll be delighted to come. But you'd better ring him up yourself. He sometimes arranges a game at the Club." Deirdre was laughing now. ("I'm only too thankful to 'spare' Mark to-day"—was her secret thought.) "I'll give you his number at the office."

"How sweet of you," said the voice. "Wait a minute, I'll write it down. . . . And then, some day, later on, we *must* meet, you and I, and have a nice quiet chat. I must fly now—my massage-woman is waiting for me. Oh, by the way, she's simply splendid if you want any face-treatment, amusing too!—goes everywhere and knows *all* the latest gossip, although, of course, she's quite discreet!"

Deirdre tried in vain to fit these somewhat conflicting statements together. Her arm ached with holding up the receiver to her stunned ear.

"Then I mustn't keep you," she said quickly.

"Oh, she can wait," said Mrs. Hardwick. "I wanted to ask you, have you seen Mrs. Meredith lately? I hear she's going to divorce her husband. I feel so sorry! I must confess I like him—a charming man! Such a pity, don't you think so?—to make these sort of quarrels public! Oddly enough he reminds me a little of Mr. Caradoc—not in face, but the same courteous, amusing manner! But, then, quite between ourselves, she *is* so dull, isn't she?—completely wrapped up in the children."

"Perhaps they're a consolation." Deirdre's voice was rather dry. "I'm fond of Laura Meredith and I don't think she's *too* happy; nor likely to take a step like this unless there were definite cause for it. I should say he's what our American cousins quaintly call 'a street angel'!—not so charming in his home. I'm afraid I must go now—you have the number? Yes? Good-bye." She rang off.

"What an exhausting woman!" she thought. "Hard too. Poor Laura!" Her face was very pitiful.

"Now, there's a heart of pure gold—a real, true unselfish wife and mother. Yet she hasn't a chance! Not an ounce of the happiness that the 'butterfly lady' takes as her due! It's a funny world." She stared out into the dusty road below and her eyes fell on a barrow of



flowers, a fresh and vivid splash of colour. "I shall never be a Londoner! They're a race apart—I'm country-bred." A sudden memory of her dream returned: of cool and verdant fields. "Well, I must go and get my gloves, though I don't feel inclined for that 'At Home'!"

She studied herself in the glass that hung over the mantel-piece. Her dress of nut-brown taffeta threw up the clearness of her skin and the dark blue eyes gathered depth under the shady brim of her hat; a simple one of coarse brown straw with a single drooping ochre feather.

"I really do look rather nice!" she thought, with a smile at her vanity. "If only I had some new gloves. . . . Never mind!—the cleaned ones must do."

She went back to her room to fetch them, sewed on a button that looked insecure and bending down to her patent shoes gave them a last rub with a cloth.

It was the year when scarves were worn and she drew some folds of yellow chiffon round her shoulders and secured them with a knot of brown and yellow pansies.

On her way out she paused at the pantry to speak to Day.

"I'm going now; I shan't want tea. If Mr. Caradoc rings up to say he won't be home to dinner stop Cook from doing the chicken—fish will be enough for me. And you'll see his clothes are all put out ready for him, won't you, Day?"

"Yes'm. You *do* look nice! You'll excuse me, mum, for saying so?"

Deirdre laughed happily. She ran down the flight of stone steps which led to the street, and at the door met an incoming telegraph boy.

"Fer Caradoc," he explained.

"For me?" She took the envelope and tore it open.

The message ran:—

"Many happy returns of the day, dear child." It was signed simply "Mother."

"No answer." Her cheeks were flushed.

"Then I'm not forgotten," she said to herself, "after all!—I'm glad of that."

The bus was intolerably hot; she was wedged between two portly women in an odour of petrol and cheap scent,

but to-day she hardly noticed it. She began to look forward to the party.

Perhaps Laura would be there? Or there might be music—a good band . . . ?

Before the Hyde Park Hotel, carriages were drawing up, discharging dainty, well-dressed women, and occasionally a man in a taxi.

She went serenely up the steps and joined in the stream pressing on. She heard the servant call out her name—"Mrs. Mark Caradoc"—and in front of a screen of crimson ramblers was received by her hostess, a large lady with a puffy face set in a smile, and restless eyes that glanced at her and passed on to the next arrival.

Deirdre struggled through the mass of chattering women, with here and there the face of a bored and heated male, until she reached the balcony where tables were laid ready for tea, overlooking the green of the Park.

A tall girl with a hard face under the latest fashion in hats nodded to her and said abruptly, "Colonel Japp," as she hurried past.

Deirdre glanced down with a smile at the object of this introduction, a short but erect middle-aged man with grizzled hair and prominent eyes.

"You'd like some tea," he said at once. "Hot, isn't it? This way—empty table at the end."

He steered her through, making a path by sheer force, pulled out a chair and almost pushed her into it.

"Tea—coffee—or anything iced? Can't recommend the cup," he added.

"Coffee, please." He was off at once to intercept a flying waiter.

Deirdre leaned back in her seat, her eyes instinctively drawn to the Park, and the fine old trees with their heavy burden.

"I say, Jim," said a voice behind, "collar those strawberries before they're gone."

"Righto!" A black-sleeved arm came over Deirdre's shoulder, and without any apology the dish was hurriedly abducted.

"And the cream, you rotter!"

Deirdre turned, faintly indignant, and saw the face of a young girl with elaborately waved fair hair and a chiffon dress cut into a "V" to the limit of propriety, but "saved" by a beautiful "malmaison."

Her eyes, dark and worldly-wise, returned Deirdre's quick glance with an insolent stare, and travelled down over the brown taffeta.

Colonel Japp came bustling back.

From the table behind rose the remark, whispered but plainly audible:

"Jappy's got the 'lemon'—what?" followed by a burst of laughter.

"If that's youth," thought Deirdre, "I'm rather glad to be middle-aged."

She turned to her cavalier, stiffly seated by her side, thankful to see that the shot had missed him.

"How clever of you to get this table! It's nice to feel a breath of air."

"Yes," but his eyes were wandering. He brought them slowly back to her. "Did I see you in the Park this morning? At the meet of the Four-in-hands. Seem to remember your face, somehow. Or perhaps it was at the Opera last night?"

"No, it couldn't have been me—" she broke off as the waiter appeared with a cup of coffee, a Perrier and glass.

"I'll bring the whiskey, sir, in a minute."

"Regular scramble to get served here," the soldier grumbled. "Always the same! No method—German waiters." He twisted the ends of his moustache.

"Let me see—we were talking about the Opera last night. I thought Caruso was decidedly out of voice. . . . Did you see Lady Marlow in Rudolfstein's box? They tell me—"

A gay young voice cut through the speech, again from the noisy table behind.

"I say, can you spare that cream?"—then, sotto voce, "Shut up, Jim!"

But Deirdre forestalled the Colonel as, obediently, he reached out his hand.

"We don't mind exchanging it for the strawberries," she suggested calmly.

The girl caught the twinkle in her eyes.

"All right—it's a deal!" She laughed shortly. "Rather a sport!" she announced to "Jim." "Pass 'em across—we've taken the best."

Back came the dish with its mangled remains.

"I hear," the Colonel plodded on, "she is going to be at the Ball to-night—the Albert Hall one, of course—in the costume of Cleopatra. Some one suggested that Rudolfstein should go as the Asp—rather funny. Ha ha!" His abrupt laughter was like a bark. "You going? What's your dress? No! Why not?"

His prominent tired old eyes seemed to pop out as though on springs.

"I've given up dancing." Deirdre smiled.

"Oh, there won't be much dancing done—beyond the pageant part, I mean." He looked at his neighbour curiously. "Up from the country," he decided.

One of the hostess's daughters passed and tapped his shoulder.

"When you've done—" she murmured, then paused to shake hands with a guest. "Oh, Lady Brayle, have you had some tea? Let me introduce *Colonel Japp!*"

He jerked himself onto his feet at once.

"Delighted! Won't you take this chair? Tea—coffee—something iced?"

But Lady Brayle produced from behind her a languid girl.

"My daughter," she said.

Deirdre laid down her empty cup and rose from the table.

Japp looked relieved.

"Here are two places. No, thanks, I've had all I want." With a little nod she passed on towards the doorway. She was checked by an incoming rush of people and, to her amusement, caught the words:

"Did I see you in the Park this morning? Or was it at the Opera last night?"

"Does he say it to everyone, I wonder?" Her face brightened as she caught the wave of a hand from the further room, beckoning, and a friendly smile.

"There's Laura! What a relief! If only I can get to her."

She saw her chance and was pressing on when she felt a sharp tug at her dress and found her further progress checked.

"Let me help you," said a voice. "There's a nail in this table—jolly careless!"

She glanced round. The end of her scarf was firmly caught on the projection.

"It doesn't matter," she gave it a pull, exasperated by the delay.

"Hold hard—you're tearing it!"

The breezy voice held her attention. She saw a man of youthful years, with a fresh brown face and laughing eyes, blue as her own. Something sincere and friendly in the answering glance made her feel that here at least was a kindred spirit—an individual divorced from the crowd.

She moved closer, relieving the strain on the fragile material.

"I'm so sorry. It's giving you a lot of trouble."

"Not at all! Won't you sit down?" He nodded to the empty chair he had just vacated. "If you stand there you'll get battered in this . . . mob!"

He lowered his voice on the last word with a quick mischievous smile at her.

She slid into the narrow seat willingly. Already an arm with a sharp elbow had driven its way into her back.

"Is that just as easy for you?" She watched his nimble fingers work the nail sideways, loosening it. The chiffon was wound mysteriously round this and the iron work. "It will come out in a minute. I'm a regular 'handy man' you know."

"I thought so." He bore the mark of the Navy unmistakably.

"There!" He threw the nail away out of the window. "Now it's easy. Good egg!" The scarf was loose. "And I've saved the gusset!" His voice was triumphant.

"Gusset?—oh, you mean the hem." Deirdre laughed.

"Thank you so much. I saw myself like Absalom, suspended here for all time."

She made a half movement to rise. His face changed.

"Oh, I say, don't go. Have you had some tea? You might take pity on a fellow. I don't know a soul here! What about some strawberries?"

The two other occupants of the table rose and wandered off.

"That's great!" He seized a waiter, gave his order and settled down facing Deirdre, to her amusement taking her consent for granted.

"I wonder if you know my brother? His name's Thursby—a commander."

"Thursby? You don't say so! I was under him in my last ship. And you're his sister? I'm glad now I strayed into this battle-field. Look here, I'll tell you a secret!" He leaned across the narrow space dividing them, his eyes dancing. "I'm here under a false flag—not a guest, not even invited!"

"Did you climb in from the Park?" Deirdre gave a smothered laugh. He looked so mysterious.

"No, but I might get out that way. Happy thought! It's rather a drop!" He peered down from the window.

"Well, don't do it while I'm here—I don't want to be called at the inquest!"

"Don't be alarmed. As a matter of fact I'm not at all anxious to go *now*."

He gave her a frankly killing glance, so boyish she could not take offence.

"Tell me the whole story," she said. "I promise I won't give you away."

"No, don't—'have me for keeps,' as a girl once said to me in Florida. Though I'm rather off girls at present. . . ." He stared past her out of the window.

Deirdre saw that a slight cloud had overshadowed his bright face.

"Yes?" she put in very gently.

He gave her a quick sidelong glance. Her sympathy drew his confidence.

"Turned me down," he said grimly. "She *was* pretty,

too." He sighed. "Like a flower. Oddly enough she was named after one—Hyacinth. I don't know why I'm telling you this—it can't amuse you in the least!"

His listener evaded direct reply.

"There's something deliciously spring-like about it—the name I mean. I can picture a girl with a slim curved neck and pale gold hair. I think, too, she'd have long white hands."

"That's her—to a tick!" He glanced at his new friend in amazement. "Jolly clever of you to guess it. Now what's the colour of her eyes?"

"Ultra-marine. No, greener than that—like the sea in the North on a sunny day."

"I say! Are you a clairvoyante?"

"No, I was thinking of the flower."

A little silence fell between them. Then the boy went on again.

"I hadn't an earthly chance, you know. Another chap—funny thing. . . ."

"And she married him?"

"Heavens, no! He was married already—that's the trouble! . . . Hullo! here are our strawberries. *Now!*" He piled them on her plate. "Too many? Oh, nonsense. I like to feel I 'spoil the Egyptians.' Come to think of it, the hostess looks somewhat like the Sphinx. Who is she, do tell me?"

He laughed as he put the betraying question.

"I shan't tell you. Not until I hear the whole of the adventure. You might be a burglar in disguise—oh, do *stop!*" He was pouring the cream over her fruit recklessly.

"That enough? Well, it's like this. I came to town just for the day to see my dentist—he lives in Sloane Street—did some shopping in the morning and turned in here—the grill-room—to lunch. I'll pass over the horrible hours I spent later in that chair, but, anyhow, I crawled back half an hour ago to pick up a parcel. Then I felt a longing for tea and remembered I'd once had it here in this balcony over the park—seemed a jolly good idea. I noticed there were a lot of people crowding in but until I got level with the first door it never struck

me it was a party. Then some villain seized my hat and the people behind pushed me on and before I knew where I was I was shaking hands with a stout lady, and I'm blessed if she didn't introduce me to two girls as 'Captain Brown'! My name's Trollope—Ralph Trollope—but I wasn't anxious to explain. I thought the best thing was to feed them and then slip out quietly.

"But the awful part of the business was, there was only one door through which you could leave, guarded by the elderly sphinx. Each time I've made a dash she's turned me back with a fresh draft!"

Deirdre laughed at his despair.

"Why didn't you say you had an engagement elsewhere—were bound to go on?"

"I *did*! But no one listened to me. They never do in polite circles. *You* talk and they take a rest and look about, or vice-versa. Doesn't matter what you *say*! Haven't you ever noticed that?"

"Yes—often. But then you see I'm not at all a society woman. I'm an onlooker—partly by choice."

"I'll bet you see more of the fun! It must get pretty stale at times. Now I like London for a week—the theatres and all that—but not to live in. Lord, no! There's nothing for a man to do."

Deirdre, watching his smooth young face, browned by the sea, agreed with him.

Colonel Japp came bustling past with Lady Brayle, his forehead crimson. His prominent eyes encountering hers held no glimmer of recollection.

"What a life!" She thought to herself. "And that's a man who has tasted power and has seen the world and service abroad; to retire and come home to *this*—trading in small talk and muffins!"

"Well?" Trollope was smiling at her, "A penny?"

"Not worth it," she laughed. They talked a little longer, then she glanced at the watch on her wrist.

"Time I was going—it's getting late."

"Must you? If so I'm coming with you. You can't desert your brother's pal! Promise me that you'll see me through?"

"I'll do my best." She pushed back her chair. "I



could introduce you if you liked and put things on a better footing?"

For a moment he looked aghast.

"Ah, you're only pulling my leg. You're awfully like Thursby, you know. I think it's the eyes—though he's older than you."

"Younger!" she laughed over her shoulder as she led the way through the doorway. "By two years—Jack was the baby."

"You don't say so! You're joking again?"

"No, it's true," she laughed back. "You want to get round me—I know why!" She made a mischievous gesture towards the hostess whom they could see ahead, still on her feet, shaking hands. Against the background of wilting roses, her tired, fat face shone like a moon.

Soon they were near enough to hear her.

"Good-bye" . . . "meet Monday" . . . "don't forget Friday's dance" . . . "so glad" . . . "good-bye." . . . She looked on the verge of a collapse.

"And that's *pleasure!*" thought Deirdre. . . .

"Now for it!" said her escort.

A few late comers were announced. The hostess braced herself anew.

"How de do? Let me introduce . . ." she glanced sideways and checked Trollope, "Mr. Digby," she said firmly.

"I'm afraid I must go," the victim stammered.

Deirdre came to the rescue.

"We're dining out," she explained, "*early*—so sorry—good-bye."

They fled past the line of lackeys.

"That was a near shave," he whispered. "Thought the old Sphinx had got me again! Wait a second. I'll fetch my hat. I'm going to drive you home, if I may? My train doesn't go till eight o'clock."

Deirdre paused at the head of the stairs.

A pair of guests stood below her exchanging a few parting words. The girl had a wistful, pretty face. The man looked distinctly bored.

"Dreadful crush," the girl was saying in a weary voice, "wasn't it? I only went because of the dance. You

*will* turn up, won't you, Ted? I explained to her that I should bring you."

"I'll try to," the man replied. "Not sure I can manage it. Did you taste that 'cup'? Poisonous!"

"No, but the iced coffee was tepid."

The man laughed and raised his hat.

"Well, I'm off. You don't catch *me* going to one of those shows again!"

He did not attempt to lower his voice.

"And that's *gratitude*," thought Deirdre.

### CHAPTER III

THE clock outside slowly boomed twelve. The windows were both opened wide, but the blinds hung immovable. The air felt burning and used up.

"It's no good," Deirdre decided, "I can't sleep. I'll get a book."

She made her way to the dining-room and switched on the electric light, blinking a little at the glare; then became conscious of the relief of the dark walls and stained floor. The room felt cooler than her own.

On the wide desk a drawing-board was propped with an unfinished plan. Absently she stooped and picked a pencil off the floor beside it, glancing at her husband's work. It was a design for a garage to be added to a country-house.

Caradoc was an architect, the junior partner in a firm which had steadily worked its way to the fore in the careful hands of his uncle and cousin.

Deirdre knew that he owed his position solely to his mother's influence. James Goodenough tolerated his nephew's presence in the office on the plain understanding that the latter took no active part in its management.

He received a minor share in the profits but his work was mainly that of a clerk.

This was gall to the younger man's pride but the indolence and love of pleasure that underlay his outlook on life was stronger than the call of ambition. He grumbled; but took his money. Moreover he feared his mother's brother.

Goodenough had long ago summed up his junior partner. He treated him with a smiling disdain, profoundly indifferent to his temper; aware too that at times his nephew could be useful on the social side. He brought in wealthy clients whose tastes ran to "cottages" in the country which often grew by means of additions to the dimensions of a mansion.

Caradoc showed a certain skill in designing these playthings of the rich. It suited his own inclinations and although he was not a true artist he had an eye for proportion and line. His secret leaning to luxury helped him in the choice of detail. His "cottages" were not only artistic—they were comfortable and well arranged.

Goodenough rarely interfered in this minor department of his office. The real business of the firm was the erection of public buildings in which his son took an active part—a quiet, steady, plodding man ten years younger than Caradoc.

Both father and son liked Deirdre. At times they sincerely pitied her. Twice since her marriage a threatened rupture between the uncle and the nephew had been averted through her intervention, unknown to her angry husband.

But in between his blacker moods Caradoc held an odd appeal to the people who knew the man well. It was not induced by his handsome face alone, but by something disarming in his nature; like a spoilt child he resisted correction but reserved the right to an ultimate pardon.

All through his life this curious trait—the wistful hint beneath the reserve and cold indifference of his manner—had knocked at the doors of stronger hearts, calling to their sense of protection.

"You can't 'elp feeling sorry for 'im! 'E don't *mean* it," his nurse had said. "'E's a tartar and no mistake—but *there* . . .!" She stayed for fifteen years.

A spoilt boy—a spoilt man—he had never learnt self-control. Proud and touchy, he placed the fault of his lack of success at others' doors. But beyond this playing with the truth to soothe his hurt vanity, he was honest at heart and very loyal. Deirdre knew that no single word of their private quarrels would pass his lips outside his house, and that should anyone dare to hint at the slightest disparagement of herself, he would meet with a snub and lose Caradoc's friendship forever.

Had his father lived, she often thought, how different might the outlook have been.

Mark had needed the strictest discipline; not the weak love of indulgence. But his mother had made the child

her toy. She had rarely dared to thwart his whims in her almost sensuous craving for love.

"He is all I have!" had been her excuse; and she jealously guarded him from the world. He had never been to a public school. His tutors were chosen by herself, his friends, his occupations even. And when she died she handed him, still wrapped in conceit, to her only brother.

James Goodenough accepted the charge, unwillingly, at his sister's death-bed.

Loyal to that last promise, in the course of years, he had made him a partner, encouraged his efforts, ignored his temper, with a shrug of the shoulders that spoke volumes!

Caradoc, extremely good-looking and a bachelor with moderate means, had drifted into society of varying grades without effort. So far he had avoided marriage, but in his thirty-ninth year he met Deirdre whilst engaged in altering a country-house.

The pretty sparkling young girl full of an eager zest in life, artistic to her finger-tips, caught his fancy and later his heart.

He confided his future projects to her. Success he conceived to be his due though he lacked the patience to ensure it. He had not a tithe of her ambition which was of that nobler sort which deems a "man should strive to the uttermost" for the love of his work and his soul's welfare.

She had studied painting at home and abroad, was steeped in the old romance of art. She saw in him a second Wren. Heavens!—the wild dreams she dreamt.

Their state was patent to the eye. Caradoc made a gallant lover and Goodenough's well-known status lent an air of solid hope to the future. The engagement was very short. Her mother's health was indifferent, and the doctors ordered a "winter South," so the marriage was hurried through quickly.

A lavish wedding, a goodly trousseau; presents poured in on the pair. The day passed in a whirl of excitement. Then the first hitch occurred.

On their way to the station they were delayed by a block in the traffic and missed their train.

Deirdre laughed, but Caradoc scowled. They decided to stay in London that night at the nearest hotel and start next day on the delayed wedding tour.

All went well until the dinner, though the bridegroom was a trifle silent. The long dining-room was crowded and there seemed a scarcity of waiters.

Caradoc disdained the menu and ordered, after due thought, a dainty meal *à la carte*. (He prided himself on being a gourmet.)

Soup came, rather tepid, then a long empty pause. Deirdre, in the manner of brides, felt somewhat shy and insecure.

"*Did* the waiter guess?" she wondered. For once her speech deserted her. Her husband looked so oddly glum and answered in absent monosyllables.

Then, as the man passed again, empty-handed, the storm broke.

Caradoc's voice grew loud and fierce. He forgot his wife and all the world and shouted at the harassed servant.

Deirdre, her cheek flushed with sudden shame, tried in vain to point out it was not the fault of the waiter at all. He had done his part.

"But he *gave* the order, Mark," she said. "We've plenty of time—we can easily wait."

No avail. She learnt then that intervention made matters worse. People twisted round in their chairs and watched the scene with smiles or frowns. Caradoc at last ran down like a clock at the end of its day's work.

They hurried through the rest of the dinner. It was characteristic of her husband that he gave the waiter a double tip.

The man turned it over in silence. Caradoc was quite cheerful.

"I'll bet he'll bring our breakfast to-morrow at double-quick time," he said to his wife as they went up the broad staircase.

He led her into a gloomy drawing-room and left her :

"Just for a short smoke. You read the papers—shan't be long."

She sat down obediently.

Outside she could hear the trains rumbling heavily through the station. The room smelt unaired and close with its dusty artificial palms. She still felt a little stunned by this new side-light on her husband. Then her loyalty came to the rescue, helped by her keen sense of humour.

"Anyhow," she said to herself, "they couldn't have guessed we were married to-day!"

She picked up an old torn copy of a ladies' paper and studied it.

The great clock ticked on. At intervals she heard it strike. The melancholy of the place weighed on her like a portent.

At ten o'clock the door opened and Caradoc came striding in, his eyes bright.

"There you are!" His voice was hearty, his manner buoyant. "I came across such a good chap in the smoking-room—just back from Egypt. He's been working up on that new dam. We had a great yarn together."

"Yes?" Her voice was rather listless. He stooped down over her.

"But I told him I must get back to my wife." He emphasised the word, laughing. "And what a cold little wife it is! What's the matter, Deirdre?"

Her pride forbade direct reply.

"Nothing. I think I was half asleep!"

He gathered her up into his arms, kissing her with sudden passion.

"It's this beastly room. Let's get out of it."

So they began their married life.

Now, a far-off memory of her early ambitions for her husband swept up into Deirdre's mind as she studied the plan on the drawing-board.

"Ten years," she said to herself, "and he's still content to design a garage!"

Again the blankness of the future closed in upon her spirit. If only there were something ahead to gild the Autumn of her life. . . . Some hope—

She stirred herself and picked up a library book.

"I think I'll stay here and read. Bed's such a hot place this weather." She curled herself up in the deep armchair where the leather felt cool and smooth.

The volume was propped on her knees, the life of a painter long since dead whose work she loved; and as she turned the pages slowly her interest grew, blotting out the sense of time.

She did not hear the door of the flat open and she gave a start as Caradoc entered the room.

"Deirdre! You up still?" His eyes were shining, a slight flush was on his handsome fair-skinned face.

"Yes. I found it cooler here." Instinctively she tucked her feet under her, aware of the fact that her slippers lay, thrown off, on the hearthrug.

"It's not nearly as hot as it was." His voice was cheerful. Indeed he seemed a different man altogether from the dark-browed tyrant of that morning.

"Enjoyed yourself?" She spoke coolly.

"Yes." He smiled down at her. "You look like a dormouse curled up there."

She guessed instinctively that he was in one of his rare demonstrative moods and she shrank a little into the chair.

"Aren't you going to give me a kiss?"

She thought swiftly, her pride in arms. Yet a weariness lay upon her spirit forbidding conflict—the useless scene. Why not enjoy this moment of peace?

"If you want one?" She lifted her face.

His lips carelessly brushed her cheek. Then he straightened his tall figure.

"Jove! I'm thirsty." He helped himself from the decanter on the table, filled the glass to the brim with soda and drained it off. "That's better."

He took the armchair facing hers, and went on with a happy laugh:

"I've been in luck!—a good partner—Mrs. Lambart—that pretty woman." He drew out some gold from his pocket. "Listen to that!" He rattled the coins. "Pleasant sound, isn't it? Would you like a present, Deirdre?"



"A birthday present?" She nodded back, a touch of malice in her eyes.

"What?—your birthday? So it is! Why on earth didn't you tell me?"

She hesitated for a moment. Then let the temptation slide. "I think when one has passed thirty that birthdays are best forgotten."

"Well, you don't look it! Not a day. I'll say that for you, my dear."

She laughed. "Thanks. Did you have a good dinner?"

"You guessed it from the compliment?"

"The natural sequence." She followed his thoughts, her blue eyes mischievous.

"Well, you're wrong!" he was yawning now. "It wasn't really up to much. Between ourselves, it's an odd thing, but they never give you enough to eat. The Hardwicks, I mean. Have you noticed that? All very well perhaps for women but a man hates a little pot with a mushroom and a pinch of rice. Followed up by a lamb cutlet—all bone and pink frill—and fluffy sweets and two cheese straws. The menu's full but your plate's empty!"

"Perhaps she's economical?"

"But they're very well off," he objected. "One wouldn't say anything if they weren't. They keep a whole pack of servants and motor cars and two houses."

"Her dress must cost her something, though"—Deirdre's face was demure—"and her massage and other things. She has no money of her own. Perhaps she has to glean a little out of the housekeeping accounts. She's a pretty woman—well-preserved. . . . How would you like her for a wife?"

"Mrs. Hardwick?" He stared back, then chuckled. "No, thanks."

"Why not?" She pressed the point, curious to probe the thought behind.

"Oh, I don't know—not my style. I like her very well in a way—" He caught Deirdre's watchful gaze and laughed aloud.

"You silly child!" Then, absently, "Poor old Hardwick! he's a good chap—very quiet. But I don't wonder! How she *talks*! And there's nothing in it—like the dinner—whipped cream in Venetian glass!"

"It's a good thing she can't hear you. She's a great admirer of yours, Mark. She told me so, on the telephone, at the top of her voice, this afternoon. Then she asked me if I could 'spare' you, 'just for one evening.'"

Wickedly she mimicked the high-pitched gushing tones.

Caradoc laughed.

"And what did you say?"

"Ah—that's a secret." He gave her a glance, suddenly keen, but she went on smoothly. "Next she began to run down Laura and pity Captain Meredith. I rang off at the first chance."

"He was there to-night," said Caradoc.

"Ah! . . ." Deirdre's blue eyes flashed. She stooped down and drew on her shoes. The heavy plait of dark hair fell across her bent shoulders.

"And if it's any comfort to you," her husband added with a smile, "I played *against* him. Here you are—I mean it. Get something you like."

He held out the night's winnings.

"No." Her face was an odd mixture of shy pleasure and wounded pride. "I don't want it—not all that."

"Nonsense!"

"Well—we'll go shares. I'd rather, Mark. Yes—honestly. I know you've been rather hard up lately."

"All right," he spoke lightly, "as you like. It will pay the coal bill."

Deirdre sat very still, the coins balanced in her hand. Under her lashes she studied his face. It was perfectly calm and assured. Had he really forgotten the morning's scene? Did the memory of these outbursts fade as soon as his brain had cleared?

And, if so, was it a kind of disease? For years the question had troubled her.

Caradoc rose from his chair and felt on the mantel-

piece for the matches. With his well-shaped but nervous hand, he lit his cigarette carefully.

Then he glanced at himself in the mirror and smoothed his head with an absent touch. It shone red-gold in the light, the hair glossy and abundant.

"How old are you, Deirdre?" His eyes were still fixed on the glass.

"Thirty-five," she said simply.

"And I'm forty-nine!—Think of that. Nearing the sere and yellow leaf. Both of us."

It seemed to her that a faint note of intention lay in this coupling together of their ages.

The womanhood in her resented his calm assumption of the fact.

"No," she said, "I'm still young." She drew her kimono closely round her with a gesture of unconscious pride. "I suppose it's the quiet life I lead. I don't feel old in the least."

"And I?"

For the first time she discerned a wistful appeal in his voice. Did he too regret his youth?—that golden youth for ever fled?

It awoke in her a sudden pity; the maternal touch that a generous woman feels for the man who has taught her passion and reaped in return a higher love.

"You?" Her eyes shone clear and bright. "You're young enough for *me*," she said.

Caradoc turned abruptly. He seemed to be struggling with himself—with that odd stubborn nature of his that resisted love and yet craved it.

"And what about the other women?" He smiled with his lips but his eyes were tender.

She gave him a wise little nod.

"I'm not afraid of them," she laughed.

He threw his unfinished cigarette into the fire and bending down, drew his wife into his arms.

This time he sought her lips.

## CHAPTER IV

THE steady purr of the sewing machine stopped with a sudden ominous jar.

Deirdre, vexed, probed for the cause.

"The needle's broken—what a nuisance! The last too. . . . I meant to have bought a fresh packet yesterday. This comes of going to parties!"

She folded the unfinished curtain with a sigh and was rising to put it away when she heard a knock at the front door and paused to listen anxiously.

"I quite forgot to say I was out! I hope Day will use her wits."

Voices sounded in the hall, then steps in the next room.

The maid entered, mysterious, and came close to whisper the words:

"I said, mum, I'd go and *see* if you were in—that I wasn't sure."

"Who is it?"

"Mrs. Robert Thursby, mum."

"Cousin Maddie!" Deirdre cried. "Oh, I'm so glad. Get some tea—as soon as you can." She was off in haste, her face radiant with pleasure not unmingled with surprise.

She found her visitor in the drawing-room peering out of the broad window, a tiny creature, very slim, with exquisite little hands and feet.

"Quick, Deirdre! Come and look at this woman in purple!" This was her greeting. "Isn't she just perfectly lovely?—*Look* at her cunning little hat!"

But Deirdre slipped an arm around the tiny waist and drew her back.

"I'm not going to look at anything—except you!" She kissed her fondly. "I'd no idea you were in England! When did you cross? Why didn't you write?"

"I guessed I'd take you by surprise."

Mrs. Thursby's pale face was mischievous under its halo of hair, crisp and white as the finest flax. Her dark eyes ran over Deirdre, with a quick comprehensive glance.

"You're looking tired. How's Mark?" Her voice changed on the last word.

"Very fit," said Deirdre lightly, as she drew her godmother down on the sofa.

"Hm! . . . I reckon he ought to be. He knows how to take care of himself. And you're always studying him. A great mistake—it ruins a man!"

Deirdre smiled. "I know you think that English women have a habit of spoiling their husbands."

"All the best ones—that's the pity. But I didn't call to discuss marriage! I'm off to Paris to-morrow morning."

"Oh!" Deirdre's smile faded. "Have you had enough of London already? I never knew such a restless soul."

"But I've been here a week," the other protested. "Now, don't scold me, it's not my fault. I've had a lot of business to settle—lawyers and so forth. Otherwise I should have been round here ages ago. Come with me to Paris to-morrow?"

"Can't," Deirdre shook her head. "Still, you're a dear to think of it."

"Well, then, another time. Now, I want to talk to you. I didn't forget your birthday, my dear, and I planned to get here yesterday. But it's no good hustling English lawyers. They only use longer words." She threw back her veil as she spoke. "That's better! It's hot in London, though I oughtn't to feel it after New York—but the air's different—less vital. What are you going to do this summer?"

"Stay here," Deirdre smiled. "I shall try though to get away for a week to the sea when Mark goes golfing. I've really made no plans so far."

"Then you'll leave them to me. I'll fix things up. Wait till you get your birthday present."

"Now, look here, Cousin Maddie"—Deirdre was watching her face—"I do hope—"

But the elder woman checked her protest airily.

"'Hope on—hope ever!' I wrote that in my copy-books with many another touching maxim, pretty on paper but nix in life." Her clever dark eyes sparkled. About her was a hint of mischief. Her whole personality seemed to exhale energy and unflagging will. "Look at this!" She drew from a bag of gold chain-work, set in enamel, an envelope, opened it and flourished a photograph.

"Yours?" Deirdre leaned forward.

"No, I'm too old for such vanities. It's a snap-shot of that quaint cottage I bought two years ago at Weavers. You remember? You helped me to furnish it and lectured me soundly on my extravagance! Then you were coming to stay with me, but I had to rush back to New York."

"I remember." Deirdre took the photograph and studied it.

"What a delightful little place! It looks as if it were very old."

"It is. It was once the Turnpike Lodge; in the good old days of this free land when you had to pay for the use of the road! Of course it's been altered and added to. The late owner bought the pair of cottages adjoining it and turned it all into one building. But the outside walls are just as they were. It stands at the corner where four roads meet and there's a room on the upper floor—*here*," she pointed it out with her finger, "which has windows on three sides of it. I made that into a sort of den. It's a look-out tower to spy on your neighbours. You see everything that happens—all the social life at Weavers. I assure you, my dear, when the Fair was on, the traffic at times was quite alarming!"

"It would be—after New York."

Mrs. Thursby nodded gaily.

"I had an idea at the time that I'd spend a part of each summer there, but now that Spenser's bought a yacht I've changed my mind. I adore the sea. And besides I must have people round me—clever people who *do* things as well as talk and spend money. Life's too short to bury oneself in a country village."

"Yes—for *you*!" Deirdre smiled. She knew that the woman by her side was far too cosmopolitan to settle for long in any place. Moreover, beyond her restlessness, her intellect must be satisfied. She had no individual talent on which to expend her energy, but in place of this her strong attraction drew like a magnet a clever crowd of painters and singers, poets and authors into her own hospitable circle.

She radiated sympathy for all visible forms of beauty and her knowledge of art was no empty pose of the rich society dilettante.

"So now there's this cottage on my hands."

She glanced sideways at Deirdre.

"You could easily let it," she suggested.

"No, I'm going to give it you."

For a moment Mrs. Caradoc stared at her guest, wordless in her astonishment.

"Me! Why?" she stammered at last. "You're joking, of course? I *couldn't* take it!"

"And why not?" The little creature drew herself up, prepared for battle. Then as she saw a sudden mist veil the eyes that met her own, she smiled with a whimsical tenderness.

"Say, honey—don't you know that I *always* get my own way? And I've just set my heart on this. I *want* you to have 'Four Corners.' It's sure the very spot for you to indulge in a rest cure when you're tired. You can take up your sketching, too—it's lovely country—'hill air' and 'gravel soil.'" Her eyes twinkled as she spoke. "The owner made a point of that—I don't know why. I should never dig. Perhaps it's good for some kinds of roses.

"Deirdre . . ." She laid a hand tenderly over her young cousin's. "Don't be obstinate, sweetheart."

"I can't. You *darling*! It's too perfect." The words came incoherently. "You don't understand——" she bit her lip.

"Yes, I do." Mrs. Thursby nodded. "You've gotten this flat and you can't afford two houses, is that it? Well, of course I figured it out before I went to those dreary lawyers. You needn't refuse on that score. Now,

lean back and listen to me, and don't you dare interrupt!"

Deirdre helplessly obeyed. Her brain was in a whirl. She saw not only the Turnpike Lodge, but a way of escape for her weary nerves; a sudden brightening of the future; new interests; new visions. . . .

But Mrs. Thursby was talking again.

"I'm going to make you understand what lies at the back of this idea. I think you know when poor Robert died it was only my children who kept me sane. I *lived* for them. I had ample means. My father was not a millionaire but he wasn't far short of it and I was his only daughter. I brought them up as Robert wished—we talked it over before the end. The boy had an English education, but the girl stayed with me in New York. I went back there as soon as I could, but I came over frequently to share Spenser's holidays and take him abroad for the longer ones.

"Then after he left college he had a year in America and he made his choice—as Robert planned. He decided to join in my brother's business. Now, my little Lisa's married—a dear boy!—she's very happy. He's wealthy too. Spenser's launched and he needs very little from me. So here I am, a rich woman, with more money than I can spend. I've always wanted to do something for Robert's people if I could. Your father was his greatest friend, more like a brother than a cousin. I married at nineteen, as you know, and, the year after, you were born and I was chosen as god-mother. I hope you're not going to make me regret it!" She darted a mischievous side-long look at the thoughtful face so near her own.

"Well, to cut the matter short, I've left a few things to you and a small income in my will. Anyhow, you won't want for bread-and-butter—perhaps jam! But lately, my dear, you've been on my mind. I'm inclined to think that legacies generally arrive too late. I hope to live a few years more and meanwhile you're getting on—no longer a girl—and you've no children. I'd like to *see* you enjoy my money!

"That's why I thought about this house. You stay



for far too long in town. Every woman needs change and to *think* of your life here makes me tired! So I've settled it. It's too late now for you to evolve brilliant excuses. I've told my bankers to arrange a little account for you with them. Do you think you can live at 'Four Corners' decently on four hundred a year?—pounds that is—I don't mean dollars!" Her laugh rang out, faintly triumphant.

"*Four hundred!*" Deirdre gasped. "Cousin Maddie, it's a fortune!"

"Hm! . . . Wait till you live on it. I don't want you to beg from Mark. But I think it's enough just for the summer and odd visits." Her eyes narrowed.

Then she turned round briskly:

"Anyhow, if you want more, you can overdraw. I'll see to that."

Deirdre grasped her arm and shook it.

"Oh, do stop—it's too absurd! I couldn't dream of taking it. You dear, darling, generous thing!"

"If you don't, you'll wound me to the heart."

A little silence fell between them, charged with emotion. Then the older woman went on:

"You've the Thursby eyes—I never see you without recalling Robert's face. And that's another reason why I want to get rid of Four Corners. I *can't* stay in England long. There's no need now Spenser's home. It brings it all back again . . . that terrible illness—" her voice shook—"the knowledge I couldn't save his life—with all my love and all my money!"

Deirdre's arms held her tight—this little nervous slip of a woman with her frail body and generous soul.

"Is it—still—as bad as that?" she whispered the words. "I'm *so* sorry. I wish I could help you."

"So you can. You're a dear child; you *ought* to be happy. Say you'll agree to my little plan?" Deirdre kissed her.

"Yes, I will. But it's too much—I can't thank you. I can't really take it in. . . . But if you knew how hopeless I've felt these last weeks—and *middle-aged*—and at the end of everything! And now the country. . . . I *love* it so—and a little house all my own! The

*peace*——” her voice broke on the word. “Oh . . . I want to dance—or sing—or cry! I don’t know which. Also to hug you!”

She did hug her, mercilessly.

“Goodness, child, let me go! I’ve only this dress to travel in. Here’s Day with the tea.” She welcomed the interruption gladly, herself not far from the verge of tears.

“Day tried to make out you were not at home. Didn’t you, Day? But I saw through it!”

The maid smiled, discreetly silent.

“You know I’m always in to you.” Deirdre drew the tea-table nearer. “But it’s so rarely that I see you. You never tell me when you’re crossing. You come and go like a will-o’-the-wisp!”

“I should love to make a portrait of you, with a little lantern—in silver point. Very fragile and elusive, luring mortals to destruction! Sugar?”

“Please—after that! I’m glad to see, despite your age, your ‘middle age’—” Mrs. Thursby teased her—“that you’re still young enough, my dear, to make fun of an old woman.”

“You, *old*!” Deirdre scoffed. “With a waist that measures eighteen inches!”

“A trifle more. Still it’s small enough to be the despair of my corset woman. She says, ‘Waists are not *worn*, Madame,’ as if one just put them on and off!” Mrs. Thursby sipped her tea complacently; she was proud of her figure.

“Now, while I think of it, there’s linen and silver at the cottage—nothing at all valuable. It’s in a safe; I’ll give you the key. There’s a caretaker who’s been a cook. She lives in the gardener’s cottage, a wee place at the back. It’s screened from the house by a high yew hedge. She’s a widow—I fancy the husband drank! She hates all men except her son. Between them they look after the place and I give them thirty shillings a week and the cottage rent free. It’s understood she will cook and wash and do odd jobs when I’m there and he keeps my cabbage-patch. I think, with Day, you ought to manage. But turn them out if you don’t like

them or think you would rather make other arrangements. Only they seem respectable people."

Her voice was so serious that Deirdre laughed.

"A good solid background for me! Is that the idea? Virtue by proxy. I hope I shall live up to it!"

"Only by wearing shabby clothes." Mrs. Thursby's eyes twinkled. "I learned that—to my cost. In a village as primitive as Weavers, dress is closely allied with morals. High heels can ruin you. It's the hall-mark of depravity. To be quite above suspicion, honey, there is nothing like a mushroom hat with the brim slightly divorced from the crown!"

"And gauntlet gloves two sizes too large." Deirdre smiled. "Did you know your neighbours?"

"The rector called and talked pew-rents. But I was only there a month and very busy getting fixed. Then Lisa was taken sick and I rushed home by the next boat. They really hadn't time to call—not as time is considered at Weavers. I must fly." She glanced at the clock.

"But where—*when*—shall I see you again?"

Deirdre tried in vain to detain her.

"I can't say. Before I sail. I may go on to a cousin in Holland, or join Brenda in the Alps. . . . I never make plans ahead. It's not a bad name—'will-o'-the-wisp'!"

She fastened her veil with her neat slim hands, peered at her face in the glass, and was off, trim and daintily dressed, full of suppressed energy.

"Get to Weavers as soon as you can," she called back from the taxi. "You look as though you needed a change. Perhaps I'll come and visit you on my way back to New York."

Deirdre stood, her face wistful, on the lowest step above the street; then ran forward across the pavement, hungering for a last word.

"I've *never* thanked you—not half enough! I'll write. Are you staying at the *Bristol*?"

"Yes. You'll hear from the lawyers to-morrow explaining a very simple matter in a highly complicated way. Oh, by the bye, I forgot to say your cottage is

quite close to the Hall—a stunning old place—where the Squire lives. He has the name of being ‘eccentric,’ which sounds as though he might be human! Easily acquired I should think in a place where the women all look like trees! Au revoir, little cousin. Write and say how you like Four Corners.”

## CHAPTER V

For three days Deirdre hugged her secret, with a sense of wonder.

She still felt as though the dream might be rudely broken and she awake to the old life of empty prospects which included an airless summer in town. But a visit to the lawyer's brought full comprehension in its train.

She was the owner of a house and mistress of four hundred a year!

Meanwhile she moved about the flat, singing, dreaming, weaving plots. They gilded everything she touched.

Day watched her thoughtfully, aware of the subtle change in her mistress. The night when Caradoc complained bitterly that the steak was tough, relapsing into his surliest mood, it seemed to the anxious eyes of the maid that Deirdre was proof against the weapon of depression he forged.

"Can't think what's come over her," Day confided to the cook. That buxom widow, the mother of five, expounded her own views on the subject.

But the morning afterwards Deirdre broke the silence enshrouding Four Corners.

She showed Day the photograph of the Turnpike Lodge, in a casual manner.

"What do you think of this cottage, Day?"

The maid looked at it curiously.

"Yes'm?" She waited for a cue.

"D'you like it? We're going there for the summer."

Day's eyes opened wide.

"It looks very nice, mum." She hesitated. "In a village, mum?"

"Yes, called Weavers; and there's a garden at the back, with a tiny orchard and apple trees. It stands at the corner of four roads—quite in the country, miles from a town." Her cheeks were warm, and her eyes sparkled.

But Day looked a little doubtful.

"Well—what is it?" Deirdre smiled.

"I was thinking, mum. Would there be any shops?"

"I don't know. I suppose a few. Anyway the market town, Kilby, is only two stations off."

"Kilby, mum. You don't say so! My father's mother, she come from there. There's a theayter and barracks, too. We'd have no trouble about the food."

"Food!" Deirdre laughed aloud. "We're not going to fuss about *food*. Thank goodness," she gave a sigh, "I can eat anything."

"Oh, I see, mum," Day smiled. "Then the master's not coming too?"

"No, that is," she hesitated. "I believe his holiday is arranged. He's going golfing with some friends. The fact is, Day, this cottage is mine; it was Mrs. Thursby's birthday present."

Day looked staggered.

"Yours, mum? For the summer?" she suggested.

"No—for good! A little place to run down to when I'm tired. Isn't it splendid of Mrs. Thursby? It's furnished, too, with linen and silver; and I shall be quite independent. She's making me a good allowance."

Day, utterly taken aback, caught the infection of Deirdre's mood.

"She's an angel, mum! and you deserve it—every bit—working here . . . and no pleasures . . . and the master's moods—I'm sorry, mum."

She pulled herself up, foreseeing reproof and added:

"When do you go there, mum?"

"*We*. Of course you're coming too!" Deirdre caught the wistful inquiry in the big grey eyes. "Why—what did you think? That I was going to leave you here?"

Day beamed.

"Well, mum, I *hoped* not. I'll do my best. It looks an easy place to work." She glanced again at the photograph. "There wouldn't be many stairs, mum. About when shall we be off?"

"I'm afraid we can't go just yet, though I'm dying to see it!" Deirdre laughed. "We shall have to wait till August, Day, when Mr. Caradoc leaves town. Now,

get me my old tea-gown." Again her thoughts moved ahead. "It's just the thing for the country! I shall wear out all my shabby clothes." She went on, dreamily, as the maid fastened the worn hooks, "It's *so* lovely to know there's a place which I can always count upon. In the country, too, with no noise or fuss. Somewhere to feel there's peace and rest."

Several times in the long years of her married life she had faced the thought of separation from Caradoc—both temporary and complete. But always when her hot rebellion had given place to sober reflection she had realized that the way was barred by circumstance and her slender resources.

When her father died she had found herself in possession of a hundred a year. But she could not support herself on this, even with the help of her painting. She knew that the talent she possessed was of little marketable value, and she shrank from the thought of returning home—a failure!—to beg for charity.

Her widowed mother passed her days in permanent rooms at a Brighton hotel. She declared it was cheaper than a house and allowed her a surplus to keep on her carriage.

The mother and daughter had little in common, though when they met—a rare occurrence—they felt the old claim of affection.

At long intervals Deirdre spent a week with her parent at Brighton. But she knew that she played no part in her life. She was no necessity to her mother in the way of love or companionship. Mrs. Thursby drove her out to call on her large circle of friends, asked her advice on questions of dress, and confided her passing worries to her.

But even then Deirdre felt she disturbed the tenour of her ways, and her mother's ways were not her own. They lacked the bond of a common outlook.

For Deirdre knew that the older woman condemned the younger's attitude towards her husband. The marriage had proved a disappointment, and although Mrs. Thursby pitied her daughter, she deemed her weak and lacking in pride.

"You make a great mistake, my dear, in giving in to Mark's temper. You should hold your own and teach him a lesson."

This was a favourite dictum of hers.

Nothing could make her realize that to live in a state of perpetual revolt with constant scenes and recriminations was to aggravate the situation.

She, herself, had been adored by her kind-hearted, gentle husband. A "scene" with him was a foregone triumph, backed by a knowledge of his nature. He worshipped the pretty, faded woman and remained her lover until his death.

She could not—would not—understand that Caradoc, unmoved by tears, would retaliate by a stony silence for days on end until the nerve of the younger woman was worn to shreds. But beyond this, her maternal advice was never enforced by practical aid. She did not open her arms to her daughter and offer a home as a refuge.

And Deirdre reasoned to herself:

"At least I have a claim on Mark. He is bound to support me as his wife. Whereas if I went back to Mamma I should feel that the help she was giving me was curtailing her little pleasures. I should end by becoming an incubus!"

So on her rare visits to Brighton she avoided as far as possible all reference to her husband. She threw herself into her mother's life—the bazaar of the moment, the round of teas—and parted from her lovingly but with the sure intuition that her parent breathed a sigh of relief, conscious of a duty performed.

Mrs. Thursby would drive her up to the station in her little brougham, stop on the way for a bunch of flowers or a basket of grapes, kiss her fondly, with a faint suspicion of tears in her eyes and the inevitable remark:

"Well, I'm sure you're looking much better for your little change, Deirdre. I wish, my dear, I could keep you with me. If *only* I had a house! But you know how expensive everything is in an hotel. Still I'm very glad. . . . And now I shall have to economise. Your old mother is not well off, but always ready to



help her child. You know that, darling, don't you?" Then, as the train moved out, a last word—"Be firm with Mark!"

Firm? How can the caged bird be "firm" with the hand that bars the door? Refuse to sing?—when the master's ears are deaf to its sweetest note. . . .

Thus the lonely woman learnt the philosophy of married life: to console herself for empty days with the rare hours of a man's love.

Often she wished that she herself could thrust Mark out of her heart. But she knew that at odd poignant moments, despite his faults, she was fond of her husband.

Love is outside the laws of logic. It is elemental—as free as the wind. And to some rare natures it is deathless. Deirdre knew this, to her cost.

Something of this passed through her mind as she waited by the open window for Mark to return in time for dinner. But now the burden seemed strangely light with the vision of far away Four Corners. She held at last the power to be "firm." When his temper outraged her sense of pride she could go away and leave him to bear the material drawbacks of her absence, to miss—at least—the housekeeper!

The clock on the mantelpiece struck eight; then as she watched it anxiously the hands moved on—a quarter past. Day came in with a long face.

"Do you think, mum, I'd best serve dinner? Cook says it's getting spoilt." She broke off as the telephone rang. "Perhaps that's the master, mum."

"I'll see." Deirdre answered the call.

"Yes? Is that you, Mark?"

A voice came back.

"I'm dining out." There was no excuse.

"You can dish up," said Deirdre. She felt a slight disappointment. She had ordered a favourite dish of Mark's and bought fresh flowers for the table, conscious of the rise in her fortune. His voice had sounded irritable.

"It can't be helped," she smiled again. "But I wanted to talk to him this evening. I hope he's not

been losing money." She recalled a confession of his on the night of her birthday—a recent speculation, the result of a "sound tip" at the club, which had not fulfilled its expectations! She dined in solitary state and settled down to some needlework. At eleven o'clock she heard his step and folded the neat pile of mending.

Caradoc came in scowling.

"You up?" his voice was hoarse. "It's just as well. I've something to say."

He moved across to his writing-table and gathered up a small pile of tradesmen's books that lay there, together with a bill for light.

Deirdre had no housekeeping money, although she had often pleaded for it. Mark gave her a cheque each month after reviewing the various items. She learned to dread this ceremony and christened it "the Judgment Hour."

Now he stood before her chair, his face black and drawn with anger, the books held out to her in hands that shook visibly.

"You'll have to *stop* this extravagance! I looked through these before I left. The way we live—" his lips curled—"you'd think I was a millionaire! And there's never anything fit to eat." A paper fluttered to the floor. He picked it up and started afresh. "Look at this bill for electric light!"

"Well," she smiled back calmly, "I don't burn it. How should I? I go to bed at ten o'clock most evenings and so do the servants. It's you who are late. As for the food, I do my best to economise, but it's always dearer in the season."

"You shouldn't order it then, that's all! See here!" He turned the pages to where a slip lay. "Turbot—at 2/6 a lb. D'you call *that* good management?"

She looked him straight between the eyes.

"Come, Mark—do be just. You know you asked for it yourself. You say you can't eat brill or plaice or in fact anything cheap. And it's the same with everything. You won't touch made-up dishes. You always want the very best. And you have to pay for it in this world!"

"*Have I!*" He slammed the books down on the table violently. "It's pay, pay, all the time. And what do I get out of it? I wish to God I'd never married! I was all right as a bachelor."

There came a tense little silence. Then Deirdre rose to her feet.

"You mean that?" Her eyes narrowed. All the accumulated slights and bitter speeches of years rose up, capped by this fresh insult.

"Yes, I do. I'm sick of it! All I ask is a peaceful life" (the humour of this missed them both!) "instead of being pestered with ruinous bills and to come home to *your nagging!*"

She came a step nearer to him.

"You're sure of that, are you, Mark?" Her voice was quiet and deadly cold. "You would sooner return to your bachelor days?"

"No such luck!" Caradoc shouted. He had reached the climax of his rage and as the words rang through the room a sudden doubt fell on him, the hint of the coming reaction.

"Very well. I shall go away."

Was this Deirdre threatening him? He felt faintly stunned by it, but the bully in him stirred anew.

"You can go away—and *stay* away!"

"Yes," said Deirdre, "I will."

She moved off towards the door, white-faced but her head high.

"To your *mother*, I suppose?"

A faint sneer was in his voice and she guessed his thought. It would mean a week—at most! Full well he knew how she was placed.

"No!" She turned; her violet eyes were dark with more than scorn and anger. A hint of triumph was in their depths. Subconsciously it puzzled Mark.

"I shall not come back—if you mean that—nor trouble you for any money."

He broke in impatiently.

"What rot! Where are you going?"

Had she shewn a hint of indecision he would have barred her passage out. But she did not even turn her head.

"That," she said, "is my own affair."

He watched her pass through the doorway, opened his lips, then closed them again, though his heart was calling, "Deirdre!"

Her step faded down the passage, then he heard a key turn. Silence weighed upon the flat.

"Well—I'm damned!" said Caradoc.

## CHAPTER VI

DEIRDRE stood at the open door of her cottage drinking in the air. The evening had brought a cool breeze. It sang through the high tops of the trees with a quivering song like the far-off note of a violin with muted strings.

The road before her rose steeply with a curve—in itself a beautiful thing—to the point where sky and hill met, and, as if the line should be carried on, the Church spire pointed up to the moon, sailing above in a clear white light. On the blue cloak of the distant heavens, stars shone like golden dew and, beneath, the earth seemed to lie content, like a tired but happy child, asleep.

On either side of the winding road, cottages broke the vista of fields. No lights flickered out, for Weavers believed in "early to bed." The doors and windows were closely shut and silence reigned absolute save for the last chirp of a bird or a rustle in the dusty hedge.

Deirdre glanced over her shoulder.

"Day!"

The maid answered the call.

"I'm going out for a little walk—exploring! Don't lock the door."

"You won't go far, mum? There might be tramps."

Deirdre laughed. "I'll take a stick. Get me my hat, there's a good soul! I can't stay in on a night like this."

Day obeyed reluctantly.

"You'll not go near the farm, mum? Mrs. Slack's been telling me there's a savage dog and it's loose at night. You wouldn't like me to come too?"

"D'you want to?"

"Well, mum—yes and no! There's that big box half unpacked. . . . Hadn't you better tell me, mum, where you'd like the last things to go?"

"No. I'm not to be caught like that!" Her mistress

smiled. "You finish it. I shall be back in half an hour." She pinned on her hat and sallied forth.

Avoiding the main road that ran past the larger part of her new domain, she turned to the right up a narrow lane, where the cottages soon came to an end.

The last dwelling was a farm, set back, with a cobblestone yard. The long sloping roof of the barn was silhouetted against the sky, with a frayed edge denoting thatch, and nearer the ground, indistinct, was a huddled group of smaller sheds, from which came plaintively the voice of a cow lamenting the loss of its calf.

Beyond this, the lonely lane was shadowed by woods on either side, and Deirdre paused to lean over a gate where a cart-track started across the fields, bordered by a straggling hedge.

A puff of wind blew in her face, invitingly. She opened the gate, passed through it and followed the path with its deep ruts for a hundred yards to find that it took a sharp turn where it met a high wall of stone and stretched away to the right, shaded by tall trees above.

She went on, conscious now of the faint sweet smell of leaves and bracken. Branches bent over the wall and between the interstices of the stones ground ivy and ferns clustered. The hemlock grew tall and rank above a ditch where a fine brown thread of water trickled. On her right were flat fields filled with turnips.

A bat circled down on her path. Deirdre watched it beating the air with its leathery wings and caught its cry, shrill and faint, somehow uncanny. She recalled the fact that many people with ears attuned to a lower pitch find the note inaudible. It stirred her vivid imagination.

"And beyond that," she thought aloud, "who can tell what music there is! Myriads of tiny voices. Perhaps the flowers talk . . . and the trees? . . . All the faint far-off sounds which, blent together, we call silence."

The wall still lengthened out, grey and massive, slightly curved. Looking back she saw now that the first straight road was hidden by it.

"It runs in a wide circle," she thought, slightly in-

trigued by this boundary line unbroken by a single gate. "There must be an entrance somewhere soon."

Almost as she said the words she saw in the distance a break in the stones and quickened her steps till she came to a gate of close boards painted blue, that formed two doors, wide enough to admit a cart when both were opened.

She stopped, baffled. There was no chink through which she could peer and no latch; but a rusty key-hole rewarded her search.

The track swerved round into the wood, so firmly guarded from trespassers. Beyond the gate a mighty oak stood banished from its friends inside. In its shadow something moved and snorted, startling Deirdre.

Then she saw it was a horse, cropping at the rank grass. It was saddled, its bridle looped across a low branch. It raised its head and stared at her with its big brown eyes.

"You beautiful creature!" She stretched out her hand and stroked the silky quivering neck, which curved round under her touch, recognising a friendly spirit. "What a funny place to find you in!"

She looked at it curiously, at the clean legs and powerful quarters, a big bay with one white sock.

"I wonder where your master is? In the wood?" But the horse, satisfied, returned to its interrupted meal, tearing the grass with its strong square teeth.

Deirdre went back to the door. Stooping down, she peered through the keyhole. At first the dark mass of undergrowth seemed without any definite form. Then she caught a flutter of white. Her vision cleared. It was a dress. In a narrow glade between the trees she could see dimly two figures stand, shadowy and close together and she caught the faint murmur of voices.

Suddenly she started back with an absurd sense of shame. Through the silence—pregnant, distinct—came the unmistakable sound of a kiss!

Lovers! And what a night for it: the moonlight and the pagan woods. . . .

She turned round deliberately and retraced her steps in a panic.

"I mustn't be caught spying here." Her cheeks flushed at the bare thought.

Youth and love! . . . In sympathy she left them to their golden hour.

"For it doesn't last," she said to the night wistfully. Then she smiled. "But there must be other things in life." Again she thrust away the past.

She had reached the spot where the road branched off when she heard the sound of trotting hoofs. She looked back. There was no one in sight and following up her original thought she glanced round for a hiding-place.

A knot of elders stood where the brook widened beneath the shade of the wall. Hurriedly she jumped the stream and drew herself behind this cover.

"I should like to see the cavalier," she decided, with a sense of adventure, and parting the leaves in front of her face she found a loophole and waited, curious.

The horse appeared round the curve, and came rapidly down the track.

She could make out the rider now, though the trees obscured the light above.

He sat loosely in his saddle, with the careless ease of a hunting man which has none of the stiff skill of the soldier and yet suggests supreme control. She caught a glimpse of a long face with a dark moustache and prominent chin. His hat was jammed down over his eyes, his body suggested lean strength.

But he did not pass her. Before he reached the bend in the road he swerved aside into the field where a ploughed patch divided the turnips from the clover.

There to Deirdre's amazement he wheeled round and set the bay at the straggling hedge on her right.

It rose easily. In a flash she saw rider and horse outlined in a dark mass against the sky. Then they were gone. Holding her breath she caught the soft thud of hoofs over the adjacent meadow and, faint, receding, the steady rhythm of a gallop that soon died away.

She stole out, full of wonder.

"Against the moonlight it looked like a centaur!" The thought brought a smile to her lips. She came to



the thorn-clad gap in the hedge which the rider had chosen and peered over.

"No—not a sign of them! I wonder why he vanished that way?" Intuition supplied the reason. "He wanted to avoid the village. That was it—a clandestine meeting! I wish now I had seen the girl."

She walked on thoughtfully, full of this sudden glimpse of romance.

"It's a good thing, after all, that we can't hear the speech of the trees! I'm sure some of those ancient oaks are fearful gossips. You've only to watch the way they bend and listen and sigh. Well, I'm glad I came out to-night."

As she passed the latched gate that led from the lane to her garden, a sudden breeze wafted across a fragrant scent into her face.

"Sweet-brier!" She drew a breath full of content and paused to gaze up at the cottage before she entered.

"My very own!" Her voice was tender. Already she loved Four Corners.

In the hall which had once been the living-room, supper was laid on the gate-legged table, a frugal meal but flanked by a small bottle of wine—Day's forethought.

This suggested a new idea. She filled a glass to the brim and passed out into the garden.

On either side of the cinder path that led to the orchard was a border of straggling flowers. Tobacco plants, white-faced, stared at her like a crowd of pierrots. Behind these, sunflowers and hollyhocks made a dark background against the moonlight.

With a serious face Deirdre chose an open space flanked by a well where forget-me-nots were clustered, asleep.

"Libation to the high gods!" She poured the wine on to the soil. "Gods of the hearth and the fruitful earth, bless this homestead and prosper it!"

She stood there smiling for a minute, feeling the warm silence around steal nearer like a cloak.

Then a voice startled her.

"Now, mum—do come in! You'll be catching cold in that damp."

## CHAPTER VII

"THERE'S only tacks at a penny the box. P'raps Mr. 'Iggs could oblige you. 'E's the carpenter, mam, just over the 'ill—the second cottage to your left."

So spoke the local Whiteley, a stout, voluble, bustling body, from behind a counter piled high with an amazing stock of goods. "We keeps *most* things"—she nodded at Deirdre with an air of wisdom—"but *not* nails. We could always get them for you, mam, from Kilby, if you cared to wait?"

But Mrs. Caradoc had learnt what "waiting" meant in the sleepy village.

"I think I'll try the carpenter." She gathered up her purchases and retreated into the dusty road.

Mrs. Potter bustled out after her, importantly.

"It's straight up past the church—you can't miss it. Good day, mam."

She was not averse to shewing the neighbours that she was "on terms" with the new-comer.

Her shrewd eyes had summed up the latter as a "lady born and quiet-spoken and means to deal in the village."

This was her dictum later on to folk who dropped in casually for a reel of cotton or "quarter of tea" to gather gossip at first hand.

Deirdre trudged up the hill in the midday heat, came to the brow, and found herself, with a sigh of relief, faced with the golden haze of the valley.

She paused for a moment to drink it in: the wide expanse of open country, well wooded, deliciously green, dotted by farmsteads and little hamlets strung on the thread of a winding road.

Beneath her a quarry gleamed, chalk-white. She could see, like toys, the tiny trucks and figures of men, restless as ants, working in the huge gap. A miniature train crawled along a single line, puffing out a column of

smoke. This hung suspended in the air above the tree-tops like cotton wool, as the engine slipped into a tunnel and Deirdre, recalled from her dream—a confused idea of the size of the world and the Lilliputian proportion of man—crossed the road and made her way to a group of little thatched houses.

One of them had a long shed attached to it where a stack of wood and scattered shavings suggested that this was her destination.

She tapped at the door. No response.

Then a watchful neighbour appeared on the scene and leaned over the boundary hedge.

"Mr. 'Iggs" was away for the day. Would the lady leave a message?"

Deirdre thanked her, but shook her head. Her errand was of no importance.

The neighbour stared at her curiously.

"If it's fer work, 'e'd like to know." She paused, then made a random shot. "From 'Four Corners,' isn't it, mum?"

"Yes." Deirdre felt amused. She guessed how quickly news travelled in the village and that her sudden arrival had formed a topic for discussion.

But she did not care for the woman's face; so, presently she retraced her steps, with one last glance at the drowsy valley.

The sun poured down upon her head and when she came abreast with the church, the shelter of the fine old trees lured her into the quiet churchyard.

She sauntered up the paved path, where yews dipped over the graves, with their time-stained tombstones which, here and there, had sunk almost out of sight.

As she came to the angle of the porch a figure rose by the side of a mound—that of a tall, angular woman with shrewd, grey eyes and a tight mouth.

It was Mrs. Slack, the widow who lived in the gardener's cottage and acted as cook. She stood there, very grim and erect, with something faintly defiant about her.

Deirdre, glancing at the grave, saw that a fresh bunch of flowers had been tightly wedged in a clean jam pot

and placed beneath the new head-stone on which the name appeared, "John Slack," followed by the familiar text anent the Lord's giving and taking.

"Good-day!" She nodded pleasantly as she came up to the still figure.

Mrs. Slack's tense face relaxed.

"I just slipped away, mum, for 'alf an hour—seeing as the lunch were cold. It's the day 'e were buried, mum." She never alluded to her husband save by this pregnant pronoun.

Deirdre looked sympathetic.

"I hope I haven't disturbed you," she murmured. The woman was free to come and go as she liked between the hours for meals.

"No, mum, I've finished now." Sombrely she stared down at the roughly clipped and faded grass, bleached in the shadow of the trees, and the flattened nosegay of marigolds edged round with a frill of ferns. "No one can say I forgets my duty—dead or alive."

It was like a challenge.

Deirdre felt slightly nonplussed.

"One can see that—the flowers look nice. It must be a sad day for you."

"Sad?" The woman caught her up with a mirthless laugh. "'E's better there! 'E can't do no more mischief." She wiped the rusty scissors she held.

Deirdre's thoughts moved quickly. She remembered now some words of Day concerning this woman's married life and the birth of her child, the shambling youth with vacant eyes, who minded the garden.

She suspected the son of being half-witted, yet she knew he was his mother's joy. Rather nervously now she offered the fragment of consolation:

"You have your boy."

The woman nodded.

"Yes, mum—and a good son. 'E's not quick, as you might say, but steady." Her face clouded again. "And if it 'adn't been for 'im—" it was evident she referred to the dead—" 'e'd 'ave stood a better chance, mum." She broke off as a tall man in clerical dress came briskly out of the church porch.

"Good-morning!" He nodded to Mrs. Slack and glanced sideways at the stranger.

Deirdre saw a thin brown face, heavily lined, with sad dark eyes under rather heavy brows.

An impulse moved her to speak to him.

"I wonder—is the church open? Can one see it on a week-day?"

The Rector stopped courteously.

"Certainly. The usual hours are from two to four, but since I'm here——"

Deirdre broke in, protesting:

"Oh, but I mustn't trouble you. I can come again in the afternoon. It's an old church, isn't it?"

"In parts—the Mesurier chapel, and the east wall—the roof's modern. Some of the oak is rather fine—the squire's pew and the choir stalls. Won't you let me show it to you?"

"You're very kind," said Deirdre. "I'm so fond of old churches and this one, of course, interests me, as I've just come to live at Weavers. At Four Corners—I'm Mrs. Caradoc."

"Ah! . . . I heard of your arrival." The Rector smiled. "In this small world a stranger is a local event. Forgive me a minute, and then, if I may, I'll show you the tomb—the Mesurier tomb—which we consider our greatest treasure."

Mrs. Slack had drifted off and the Rector, striding after her, caught her up near the gate.

"There's a Mother's Meeting to-morrow at three—I hope you'll be there." His deep voice floated back to Deirdre. "I'm glad to see you've been tidying up your husband's grave."

The woman turned, her face hard and resentful.

"Now, sir, you know what I *thinks!* But I won't have the neighbours talking."

"I know what you *say*—and what you've suffered."

They moved on out of earshot. Deirdre guessed that the thin grave man was pleading forgiveness for the dead.

"Poor soul!" she said to herself. "I don't expect he understands. She's gone through some bitter trouble

and is still a rebel. I rather like her. At any rate she's not a humbug."

After a space the Rector rejoined her.

"Now, Mrs. Caradoc, I warn you beforehand to pull me up if I tire you. My church is my hobby—by which I mean its history!"

The way in which he altered the phrase revealed a certain sense of humour.

"By the way," he said as he fitted the key in the heavy door, "your name is familiar. Years ago when I was a curate at Tiphook—do you know the place—there was a Mrs. Caradoc who lived at the manor house."

"No—really?" Deirdre smiled. "That was my mother-in-law. She died some time before my marriage. My husband was her only son."

"You don't say so? A small world. She was a charming old lady of the old school. I remember your husband; tall and fair, very good-looking; an architect—am I right?"

"Yes." Deirdre passed through into the cool silent church.

The Rector followed and lowering his voice, ran on:

"A pity he's not with you to-day to give us the benefit of his knowledge. He will appreciate the Hall—where the Squire lives—a lovely old place and in wonderful preservation."

Deirdre stared straight ahead.

"He can't leave London very often—he's too busy." She hated herself for this evasion of the truth, but saw the pitfall under her feet. For the first time it flashed across her that her lonely state might be misconstrued. She wished from the depths of her heart that the Rector had not known her mother-in-law.

For half an hour they wandered round the little church, the clergyman eager to shew his guest the scanty treasures that Time had spared, until they came to a side chapel, behind the Squire's high oak pew.

Under a narrow stained window Deirdre saw the famous tomb. Two figures finely carved rested on a sarcophagus—a knight in armour with, by his side, his

"ladye," prim and closely coiffed. Their feet were propped against a cushion and beyond this was stretched a hound—its muzzle thrust out on its paws.

Deirdre studied the inscription setting forth the manifold virtues of "Rollo Mesurier and Ann hys wyfe," whose "sober and godly lyves" had been rewarded by thirteen children.

The light from above, rose-tinted, poured down on the still forms, softening them to the semblance of sleep. It brought back into her mind a long-forgotten fragment of verse:

Like sculptured effigies they might be seen  
Upon their marriage tomb, the sword between;  
Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

She wondered dimly if these two had loved and suffered and persevered, conscious of failure, upheld by pride, to lie together in their death.

"It's much more honest to break away," she stifled the faint regret in her heart, "but I'm not sure if it's more courageous. . . . There's something grand in the old notions—though to moderns it seems to be living a lie."

Outside the church she asked a question. "Is the Squire married?—the present one?"

The Rector glanced at her, surprised. Her voice had a curious thrill in it. Conscious of this, she explained quickly.

"I was thinking of 'Rollo and Ann hys wyfe.' Somehow they ought to have been the last. They're too *fine* for a modern contrast."

"You think so?" He smiled gravely. "The present man is a 'Rollo' too—it's a family name. He's not unlike his ancestor. A strong type, isn't it?" Then he answered her first question. "His wife is dead—a sad affair. . . ." He hesitated and went on, "There's one daughter but no son. Of course he's young and may marry again." He glanced at Deirdre humorously. "It will be his own fault if he doesn't! But so far he has done his best to disappoint the local hopes. He's a curi-

ous fellow in many ways, quite unlike the old Squire. He doesn't hunt and he doesn't shoot. His one hobby is gardening. He admits candidly that he hates society in any form. Personally I find him charming—extremely well-read and a witty talker. He's most generous in the village but he loathes form and ceremony; in fact, a Bohemian to the core!"

"He sounds nice!" Deirdre laughed as they paused outside the rectory gates. "A man who leads his own life and is not bound by convention."

The Rector gave her a shrewd glance.

"It is sometimes a little dangerous to ignore the opinion of the world." He balanced the words carefully. "Though occasionally one meets a man who is moved to this attitude through genius. In other cases it often hides a supreme form of egotism."

"I wonder!" Deirdre's smile faded.

The Rector became a shade sententious.

"To live entirely for oneself rarely brings happiness. One must not forget the weaker brethren for whom the social rules are framed."

"But don't you think—" her eyes were wistful—"that if one is really true to one's self and honest one can shape one's life *apart* from the world, without hurting others?"

He did not answer her at once. He guessed that the words were not lightly spoken and, meeting her glance, a sudden spark of sympathy quickened in his own.

"Very few lives," he said, "are not bound up with outside ones. It becomes a question of influence. I'm inclined to think that to waste one's powers in this direction through solitude is almost as sad as to squander them without thought. Do you catch my meaning? It's a case of the 'buried talent' again."

"Hullo, Gage!" a voice broke through the Rector's speech trenchantly.

Deirdre turned at the sound of hoofs trotting towards them down the drive. She saw a man on a big bay horse, waving his crop to attract attention. He drew rein in the gateway.

"I've just called at your place with a note from



Meg for your wife. I hear she's away—staying at Kilby—pot-hunting!" He laughed gaily. "What a champion player she is! I suppose she'll be there till the tournament's over?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so." The Rector nodded. "The worst of it is that my organist's ill and I've no one now to take his place. I was thinking of you. . . ." He saw that the rider was eyeing the pretty woman beside him. With a view to a useful partisan he introduced Mrs. Caradoc to "Mr. Christopher Pontefract" and added jocosely to the lady:

"The musical genius of these parts."

"Oh, come now!" the rider protested. "Don't you believe half he says. He's only longing to foist his choir on to me—that's his dodge! No, Gage, I'm not to be snared. I'm going fishing next Sunday." His long face, slightly underhung and barred by a short dark moustache, was mischievous and Deirdre smiled.

"I only wish I could play myself." She glanced down as she spoke. The horse was pawing up the gravel and she recognised the white sock. ("It is the centaur—I thought so. He little guesses I saw him last night.")

She felt Pontefract's hazel eyes studying her and looked up, as the Rector began to speak again.

"I only meant for the morning service."

"Only!" Pontefract chuckled. He glanced down at the newcomer, approving her clear and warm-toned skin.

"Now, Mrs. Caradoc, you shall have the casting vote. Behold a very nervous man asked to exhibit his ignorance to the whole of the village that's known him from youth. Likewise the tyrant, who stoops to flatter! What shall I do?" He waited, smiling.

"I must think." Deirdre glanced from one to the other, her face demure. "Why not effect a compromise? Play the organ in the morning and stroll by the river later on. The fish will be rising better then!"

"Ha, ha!" the young man laughed. "A perfect Solomon, isn't she, Gage? A punishment for both of us. All the time I'm pulling out those confounded stops you'll understand that it's a bribe to let me go and tickle the trout—Sabbath-breaking! Very well, I agree. To

*one* service—not more. It will do that old harmonium good to feel Miss Sophie's mittened hands caressing the notes at Evensong. You fish yourself?" He returned to Deirdre.

"I used to—when I was a girl."

"And you're living in these parts now?" The inference was obvious.

There was about him a savour of youth and high spirits, very infectious.

"I keep the Turnpike." Her eyes danced.

The Rector explained ponderously.

"Mrs. Caradoc has taken Four Corners—at the cross-roads—you know the place?" Pontefract nodded.

"Rather! A pal of mine had it once as a hunting box. He added on the cottages—awfully snug. I should think I do! Many a jolly night I've spent there; that room, you know, with windows each way. A man I knew—a medical student—had a skeleton and we rigged it up on a gibbet just at the fork of the road and frightened half the village to fits. Next time I'm passing that way I shall stop and pay toll—if it's permitted?"

Deirdre laughingly acquiesced, but, as she did so, something warned her—a stiffening in the Rector's attitude.

It puzzled her and a faint flush rose to her cheeks as she turned to him.

"It's lunch time—I must be going. Good-bye, and thank you so much for showing me that dear old church." She glanced up at Pontefract, holding in his restless horse, with a parting nod and was moving off when the Rector checked her.

"One minute!" He smiled kindly. "Are you quite settled in now? When my wife comes back from Kilby next week, I know she would like to call on you."

"I shall be very pleased," said Deirdre.

The Rector, atting clumsily, delivered himself of an "afterthought."

"Oh, by the way, Pontefract, I quite forgot to ask after yours. I hope Mrs. Chris has got over her cold?"

"Thanks—she's all right." The rider touched his horse carelessly with his heel.

In the little battle that ensued Deirdre departed, thoughtful.

A married man! All the fresh romance of that scene in the wood was shadowed now. It seemed to cast a sinister cloud over the meeting with this new and attractive acquaintance of hers, with his masterful face and laughing eyes.

"I must have made a mistake," she thought. "He doesn't look that sort of man. And yet—I'm sure that was the horse. . . ."

She walked on, puzzling it out. Again she saw the pair of lovers, the girl's white arms straining up under the darkness of the trees, and caught the echo of their kiss.

That furtive, headlong gallop home. . . .

She frowned as she reached the Turnpike Lodge.

"Perhaps," she mused, "he has a brother—very like him—*another* 'centaur'!" Instinctively the thought followed, "But morals were not their strongest point!"

## CHAPTER VIII

"My dear child," wrote Mrs. Thursby, "I am glad to hear you are happy at Weavers, but of course your news was a great surprise and I must admit that I feel a little hurt by your secrecy in the matter. Madeline seems to have been most generous—in her usual impulsive, eccentric way! As you know, we had never much in common, and I do not care for Americans. Their restlessness and modern notions on marriage (I allude to divorce) are lacking, to *my* mind, in dignity. I think it would have been far wiser had she consulted me from the start. However, I will not go into that. What makes me anxious in your letter is your present attitude towards Mark. Do you intend to *stay* at Weavers, or is it only a short separation?"

"Of course, my child, you are married to him for '*better and worse*,' and though, as you know, I have always advised you to be firm, it is never wise to leave a husband *too* long to his own devices.

"You do not say what this 'allowance' from your Cousin Maddie really amounts to or if it is *sufficient* for you to live on, in case of a separation. You should think of this seriously before you take definite steps.

"You know exactly how I am placed and that although from time to time—by dint of constant economy—I might send you a small present, I am not now in a position to do more for one of my children, although they are my *first thought*.

"My doctor tells me I must go again to Gretchenbad this year. It is a *necessity*, not a pleasure. My health is not what it used to be.

"I shall probably start in a fortnight's time, but before then I hope you will write and give me your *full* confidence. I think you owe this to your mother.

"I am having a good deal of trouble just now, as my new maid gave me notice, and it really is most annoying

to take a stranger with me abroad. I was going to ask you to look about in London, but since you are not there, I shall have to bear my own burden. It makes me feel old and lonely. . . .

"Well, dear child, I must close now, as I am so tired. The 'Sale of Work' was a great success, but of course at my age a 'stall' is no light undertaking.

"Your little sketches sold well. The vicar's wife bought one and admired it. This, I know, will please you.

"Now, please write by return and relieve my anxiety. I beg you to do *nothing rash*, and remain, as ever,

"YOUR LOVING MOTHER."

Deirdre laid the letter down with a sigh.

"Isn't it just like her?" She stared through the diamond-paned window, divided between tears and laughter. "For years she's been urging me to rebel, and now that I have at last the chance to do so she raises the first objection. Of course I see where the shoe pinches . . . money! She might know by now that I never should dream of going to her! I've never asked for any help—I'd die first!" Her face was proud. "Well, I suppose I must answer it." She sat down and took up her pen, then aware of the darkening light glanced again through the window. A thunder-storm was driving up before the wind, the blue sky invaded by an angry band, iron-coloured, edged with copper. Big drops began to fall—the forerunners of the rain—and a faint rumble rolled round the circle of hills, warningly.

The sudden change from the bright sunshine was almost startling; the silence seemed strangely intensified; not a leaf stirred; the birds had vanished.

"Here it comes!" She drew a breath of relief as the pent sky opened and the deluge poured down.

Then a figure caught her eyes, running hard, a dog at her heels, across the space where the roads met—that of a girl dressed in white. She passed the window and wheeled to the left. Deirdre guessed she was sheltering to take breath in the narrow porch. A flash of lightning let loose the thunder with the suddenness of a fired gun.

The deafening noise sent her shrinking back, stunned for a moment; then her thoughts turned to the stranger at her gates.

She ran quickly down the stairs, across the hall, and opened the door.

"Do come in—such a dreadful storm!" breathlessly she addressed the girl.

"May I? It's very kind of you." Her visitor needed no second bidding. "Olga is so frightened at thunder. I'm afraid we're both of us wet—d'you mind?"

"Of course not." Deirdre closed the door quickly as a second flash, forked and venomous, lit the sky.

"It came on so suddenly. Quiet, Olga! Lie down." The Borzoi was whimpering, tail tucked between her legs.

Deirdre, glancing at the speaker, saw a slim and willowy girl with a fair skin flushed by running and beautiful, wide, blue-green eyes. She wore a white, rain-splashed sweater, drawn down over her slim hips, with a short and shabby serge skirt that showed her ankles, slender and neat, and a pair of heavy brogued shoes. A panama hat, browned by the sun, was carelessly set on her small head, and as she spoke she drew out the pin securing it and pulled it off.

She shook the rain from it vigorously. Her hair was the palest, purest gold, wound in great plaits that shone in the gloom, almost too heavy a coronal for the delicate face and long white neck.

"Let me have that dried for you." Deirdre held out her hand, but the girl laughed.

"Oh, no, thanks! It isn't worth it—it's used to rain." She glanced around her, interested.

"How pretty you've made this place. I love those nankeen blue curtains. You ought to have some blue china on that shelf above the mantel-piece." She sat down in the ladder-back chair, which Deirdre drew forward, quite at ease, her long slim hands folded tranquilly on her lap.

"And 'Love-in-the-Mist' in a deep bowl—as a last touch. I love blue with old oak, don't you?—and copper. . . . That's a nice warming-pan!"

"Yes." Deirdre felt amused. "I'm only just settled

in. There are heaps of things I want to get. It looks rather bare at present. But I hope to pick them up slowly so as to prolong the fun."

The girl nodded.

"That's the way! I can tell you of a dear old shop in Kilby, not the grand place in the High Street, but one I found myself, tucked away in a side alley. I bought a sun-dial there last week for my rose-garden. Are you fond of flowers?"

"Yes—very. I was brought up in the country, but I've rather forgotten my gardening."

"Oh, you'll soon pick it up again. I'll come and help you, if you like. I think I've got just the plates you want for that shelf there—oriental ones. I'll look them up when I get home. There's a nice tall piece with dragons on it that would do for the centre, and a bowl"—she frowned, her fine brows drawn together—"if it isn't smashed. I can't remember."

The simple, open-handed way she offered the gift made Deirdre wonder. Who could this bountiful visitor be? She hardly knew how to reply. Day saved her the necessity by appearing with the cloth for tea.

"Will you have it here, mum, or upstairs?"

"Here." Deirdre caught her eye. A silent message passed between them.

"Might I have a duster," asked the girl, "just to rub Olga down? She's so wet—she'll make your matting in such a mess. Thanks so much."

She turned with a smile to her hostess and added naïvely:

"I was just longing for some tea!"

"I am so glad I happened to see you." Deirdre smiled back. "I was sitting in my lookout tower when I saw you running across the road. Don't you think—if I found you something—you could slip off those wet clothes? I'm so afraid you'll catch cold."

"Oh, rain never hurts me. I live out of doors all weathers—sleep out in the summer. It's so lovely when you wake! We've built a shanty in the woods—a little place on wooden piles with no walls, just a roof—and we sling our hammocks up there. It's quite close to the

lake, too ; handy for one's morning tub. D'you like swimming?"

"Yes, I love it!"

"I'm so glad," said this strange child. "Nobody here cares to bathe except Rollo—and sometimes Chris."

"Rollo!" That explained the matter. This must be a Mesurier.

"You live at the Hall?" asked Deirdre.

"Yes, of course." The blue-green eyes opened wide. Then she nodded. "I forgot you've only just come here. Chris told me all about you." She chattered on artlessly as Deirdre poured out the tea. "But he understood you came from London."

"So I do." Deirdre caught a trace of childish disdain in the way she uttered the last word.

"Ah, but you like gardening and bathing—you're not *real* town! I'm so glad. I've so few friends," she took a big bite of cake and turned, the beautiful eyes anxious, "I hope you'll come and see my garden."

"I should love to." Her hostess spoke warmly.

"What I meant to say," the girl explained, "when I spoke of London, was that I feared you might be what Rollo calls 'social,' and that would have spoilt everything."

"It's not a besetting sin of mine," Deirdre laughed, her eyes twinkling; "between ourselves, I will confess I was not a success as a Londoner."

"Good! I hate towns myself—except a few I've seen in France. . . . I've French blood in my veins—perhaps that accounts for it. Oh! I *must* tell you—it was so odd," she stooped to offer a piece of cake to the dog beside her, "you won't? For shame! She's not often as rude as this," she explained. "It's the thunder that's upset her. Olga's Russian." She spoke to the dog in some words that Deirdre could not catch and patted the fine narrow head. "She likes to hear her own language."

"You speak Russian?" Deirdre asked.

"Very little. Rollo does; but then he speaks anything. It's useful, you see, when we travel. What was I going to tell you?" She paused. "Oh, I know! A few summers ago we went for a walking tour down the Loire—



right from its source to the sea. Such fun! Part of the way we hired a punt and let the current do all the work. You've no idea how fast it runs! And close to Blois we found a church full of old Mesurier tombs. They used to have a château there, ages ago, but it was burnt in some war—I forget which. But you can't think how funny it was to stray by chance into the church and see one's own name everywhere. I've felt French ever since."

"And yet you look purely Saxon." Deirdre's eyes dwelt admiringly on that wonderful pale gold hair and the wild-rose face underneath.

"I'm not," said the girl. "You should see Rollo. He's dark as a gipsy! We met a man very like him in Brittany. But I take after my mother. She was fair—an American. She died, you know, when I was a baby. I can't remember her at all."

Deirdre felt puzzled. Could this be the Squire's daughter? Carefully she put the question:

"Then you are—I'm rather mixed—a *sister* of Mr. Mesurier?"

"Heavens, no! He's my father. Is it because I call him Rollo?" her clear girlish laugh rang out. "I always have. You see he's a pal; more like a brother—so awfully young. It *does* shock Aunt Byng! She thinks it much too familiar. But you'll understand when you meet Rollo. He's not a bit like other people." She went on rather shyly. "I wish you would tell me your name. I don't think Chris got it right."

"It's Caradoc—Deirdre Caradoc."

"Deirdre? How pretty! Irish, of course—I know the story. I'm called Hyacinth. D'you like it?" she asked ingenuously.

"Yes; it suits you. It's like the spring." She paused as a memory stirred in her mind. Had she used the same words before, or was her brain playing a trick?

But Hyacinth gave her no time to think. She rose from her chair with a lithe movement.

"It's stopped raining. I ought to go. I don't want to, but you see I promised Rollo after tea to help him with his water-garden. When will you come and see mine?"

I want to show you my 'blue vista.' Come to-morrow?" She begged like a child. "Yes—you will? At twelve o'clock. How nice! D'you know the way? The north lodge is miles round. There's a short cut you'd better take—by Brewer's farm and across the fields. You follow the wall to the first gate—it's always open in the daytime—through the wood and turn to the left; then to the right and you'll see the Hall. I'll meet you at the end of the gardens. You *won't* forget?" The blue-green eyes were wistful.

Deirdre promised her.

"I'll come—rain or snow. It's very nice of you to ask me. It's rather lonely here at times, though I love the wee place."

"Lonely? That won't do." The girl's face went suddenly grave. "But I know the feeling, when Rollo's away, though I don't *let* myself get unhappy. Rollo says that everyone *ought* to be happy—it's their duty. He says it makes the atmosphere better all round"—a mischievous smile curved her mouth, the most unchildish part of her, for the lips were full with a hint of passion that warred with the innocence of her eyes. "He and the rector argue about it. *Rollo* says it's far better to be selfish and happy than the reverse, that a melancholy altruism is a kind of infectious disease. It's more moral for people to do as they like and carry sunshine about than to execute a painful duty and be a blight upon the land!"

Deirdre guessed that she was quoting. The words sounded so odd on her lips.

"And *you* do what—'what you like'?" She smiled down into the pretty face.

"Always!—except when Aunt Byng's there." Hyacinth wrinkled up her fine straight nose in a childish grimace. "Rollo calls her the 'nettle-rash,' because she leaves us feeling prickly. Well, you will come—without fail?" She picked up her hat and dragged it on over her head in a business-like way; then extended her delicate hand.

"Thank you so much for my nice tea." She hesitated, her face warming. Impulsively she held up her cheek.

"I *do* like you. I hope we'll be friends."

Deirdre kissed the cool, soft face.

"I'm very glad to know you, dear."

Her starved heart went out to the girl. Here was youth, with youth's affection, sweet and sudden and unforeseen.

She stood for a moment in the doorway watching the slim figure stride gallantly up the muddy road. Behind her Olga picked her steps mincingly, with lowered head, still depressed by the thunder.

Overhead was a fresh-washed sky of blue, with trailing fleecy clouds suggesting the flight of wild swans, a pre-sage of a windy night. At the corner Hyacinth turned and waved. Then she vanished down the lane.

Deirdre closed the door with a sigh, remembering the letter before her.

"I wonder what Mamma would say if I quoted the Squire's theories?" The thought provoked a mischievous smile as she chose a fresh sheet of paper.



## CHAPTER IX

WITH a certain curiosity Deirdre opened the gate in the wall that bordered the wood on the morning after her meeting with the Squire's daughter.

The cart-track ran between high trees where the undergrowth had been cut back and the withered spikes of bluebells lingered; the path was soft beneath her feet with the brown dust of last year's beech-leaves. The cool shade seemed filled with life: a woodpecker tapping the hard bark, a rustling here, a soft flight there, and, far away, the shrill wild call of a pheasant broke the drowsy silence.

She came at last to a narrow bridge, with a sluice beneath, now drawn up to allow the water, unchecked, to flow through a deep-banked brook flanked by a path.

This was the "first turn to the left," she decided, and made her way along it, pausing once as a red-brown streak shot up a tree to stand and watch a squirrel at his pretty tricks. At last the branches thinned before her and she came out on a little dell, through which the stream ran merrily, fringed with meadow-sweet and rushes.

She could see no signs of any house, but, as she glanced across the field, a touch of orange caught her eye amidst the universal green.

A man was kneeling by the brook, busy building a small dam to turn the water out of its course into a freshly-dug channel.

Stones were littered about in heaps, workmen's tools and a wheelbarrow, while the turf had been laid back in places.

The splash of colour was a kerchief knotted round the man's bare throat; his shirt sleeves were rolled up above his elbows, his heavy boots were thick with clay, and under the sunshine his dark hair gleamed, innocent of covering.

Deirdre hailed him cheerfully.

"Hi! You there! Can you tell me, am I going right for the Hall?"

At the sound of her voice the man looked up, his arms still deep in the stream, and she saw his face, gipsy-like, with black hair, straight and thick, a clear, brown skin and piercing eyes.

"Straight on and the path to the right. You ought to have turned off before."

Then, without wasting further time, back he went to his task again.

"Thanks." Deirdre walked on, smiling a little at country manners. "It wouldn't have hurt him to stand up or say 'ma'am'," she decided.

Following his brief directions she found herself very shortly in the open park, where the meadow-land rose steeply to a straggling line of stone walls, which, she guessed, must enclose the Hall gardens; and, as she mounted against the sky, the great pile of the house stood forth.

Very fine and ancient it looked in the dazzling sunshine, battlemented, with its twin towers on either side, and the wide sweeping girdle of moat.

She came to this in due course and crossed by the mossy wooden bridge to find her further progress barred by another blue painted door.

"I suppose this must be the right way." She felt suddenly rather shy. Then she heard Hyacinth's voice singing within and her light, quick step.

She pushed the door, which swung back at her touch, and paused with a gasp of admiration.

Roses!—a wilderness of roses—and flying down the centre path the slim figure dressed in white, with Olga loping at her heels.

"There you are! I'm *so* glad." Hyacinth reached her gay and breathless. "I was just coming to look for you in case you were lost—like the babes in the wood! You're not tired?"

"Not a bit!" Deirdre laughed back.

"Then we'll go at once to *my* garden. This? Oh, this is just for roses—roses to cut. Would you like

some? You must take a basketful home with you. But now, come along—through here."

"Here" was a narrow passage cut in a deep yew hedge. Beyond it lay a Dutch garden, prim and quaint, and Deirdre longed to linger, but Hyacinth dragged her on with a contemptuous:

"That's nothing! It was always there—in Grannie's time. It reminds me of a Noah's Ark! You wait till you see mine—it's the best colour scheme I've done."

They crossed a stretch of velvety turf, where a gigantic cedar threw wide shadows over the lawn, descended some shallow stone steps and turned to follow a lower terrace.

"Now," said Hyacinth, "this way."

They skirted a clump of rhododendrons and azaleas and came to a wall covered with jasmine and clematis.

A narrow blue door confronted them, and Hyacinth paused before it.

"Shut your eyes. I'll lead you through and then you'll get the whole effect."

Deirdre smilingly obeyed. She heard the old hinges creak, felt a hand take her own and was drawn forward a few paces.

"Abracadabra! Behold the magic!"

At the sound of the gay and eager voice, she lifted her lids and stood for a moment bewildered by a sense of colour, a dazzling dream of fairy-like blue. . . .

"Wonderful!" She gazed entranced at the picture before her, lips parted.

On either side of a flagged path that led straight to the edge of the moat were massed plants in every shade of azure down to the blue of gentians.

Delphiniums reared their spiked heads with masses of flax-blue Anchusa; Viscaria, Himalayan Poppies, Lupins and Canterbury Bells rippled above the smaller flowers. Great clumps of Forget-me-not, Nemophila and Love-in-the-mist, Alpine Aquilegia and Lobelia vied with the summer sky. The path widened at the end round a fountain basin and this, too, was lined with fragments of turquoise mosaic from the centre of which a Mercury in bronze stood poised on one winged foot. Behind

this was a stone gateway, arched, with a deep niche above, a primitive shrine in which was placed the last touch, a "blue Madonna."

"You like it?" Hyacinth watched her friend. "It will look better still next month—some of the plants are hardly out."

"I think it's too perfect for words." Deirdre moved forward, drawn by the archway and view beyond.

Bees came blundering across her path, their wings and bodies yellow with pollen and a tiny sulphur butterfly fluttered down on a great blue poppy.

"You ought to arrange that the butterflies should be blue, too," she laughed back, "and it only needs a blue-bird to make the fairy tale complete."

Hyacinth followed her, slipping a hand through her new friend's arm.

"Come and look at my Madonna. Isn't her cloak a heavenly colour? We found her on the Italian coast, at a place called Diana Fontana, which was wrecked by a terrible earthquake, and rescued her from a ruined shrine. She comes indoors in the winter and the first branch of almond blossom that flowers is dedicated to her, to remind her of her native land.

"This mosaic we found at Prato in a funny old shop. The Mercury, I don't think, is very old, but effective—that single dark note. I wanted really a 'Dancing Faun,' but the price asked was prohibitive; though Rollo was sorry afterwards, and he rather mocks the present fountain, calls it Piccadilly Circus and suggests a few arc lights."

"How horrible of him!" Deirdre gazed out over the park, standing in the old archway. She followed the crescent line of the woods and saw for the first time the lake—the broad burnished sheet of water, broken by a single island.

"Is that where you bathe?"

"Yes. Look! You'll see the end of the diving-board beyond that little clump of willows. The bathing-shed is just behind."

"I've got it," Deirdre nodded. "And where do you sleep?"

"Oh, further on, in a green drive that was cut through the wood for shooting in my grandfather's time. We don't shoot now. Rollo and I disapprove of murder."

Deirdre glanced up surprised, but the girl's face was perfectly grave. Her little head was proudly poised on the slender neck, the aquamarine eyes sombre.

"It *is* murder." She answered the look and frowned as she saw a faint smile come and go on her new friend's face. "Have you ever heard a hare scream? I did *once*"—she shuddered slightly—"and how can you bear to see a pheasant, its beautiful coppery breast stained with its life-blood—for mere *sport*! No, it's too wantonly wicked."

"I know exactly how you feel." Deirdre spoke gently. "But still, if you come to think it out, it's no worse than killing a sheep or any other creature for food."

"One's a necessity," said the girl; "the other merely a luxury. Anyhow"—she stretched her arms above her head with a sleepy yawn—"we've other ideas of hospitality. Every bird and beast in the wood lives in safety whilst we're alive. They're guests, you see, of Rollo and mine—and, what's more, I believe they know it! They're so tame—the dear things. Rollo feeds them and talks to them. Sometimes on a moonlight night he wanders away from our sleeping lodge for hours together and talks to the hares. I always think he's more like a faun than a mere mortal. He seems himself a part of the woods, untamed and free."

Her face was dreamy, full of sweetness. "D'you believe in Pan? I do . . . sometimes. I'm sure once I heard his pipes. Rollo won't let me talk of it. He's superstitious and thinks it unlucky."

Suddenly her mood veered round. She laughed, with a girlish note of mischief.

"You're not a bit pagan, you know. You're a modern believer. I'm sure you say the Athanasian Creed right through without a single throb of compunction!"

Deirdre smiled.

"I don't quite see why that should be so up-to-date. It was written a good many years ago——"

But Hyacinth interrupted her.



"Anyhow, you're *quite* a dear! Come along and see my pigeons—fan-tails, snow-white. They look like a débutante's court curtsy!"

"What an idea!" They retraced their steps to the long lawn at the side of the house and were crossing this when the deep boom of a gong within startled them.

"That's lunch—what a bore!" Hyacinth paused. "We shan't have time. You'll have to see them afterwards."

"I must be off. I'd no idea it was so late," said Deirdre.

"Oh!" The girl stared at her, visibly disappointed. "Then you won't meet Rollo. . . . Oh, *do* stay—I'd counted on your lunching with us. And you've got to choose your blue china. I hunted it up yesterday and found, too, a copper jug we brought back from Morocco. Just the thing for your parlour." She would not listen to excuses, but chattered on, drawing her guest towards the house determinedly. "I only hope you call it a 'parlour'—it's such a dear, old-fashioned word. Would you like to come up and take off your hat? This way." She opened a door and led her guest down a short passage that brought them out into the hall.

"It's very good of you," said Deirdre, gazing around her open-eyed. Instinctively she glanced up at the far-off dim ceiling.

"Everybody does that!" Hyacinth laughed delightedly. "Isn't it nice and empty and cool? Rather like an old church, but without that funny fusty smell which always seems to go with religion!"

For the wide, stone-flagged space ran up into misty heights, where the narrow windows, set deeply in the walls, poured down pale shafts of light. The great staircase of dark oak with shallow steps, uncarpeted, led to a pair of galleries that encircled the finely proportioned hall and from which the bedrooms branched off into two wings beneath the towers.

Faded tapestry lined the walls; panther skins lay on the flags, and a long refectory table ran from end to end, covered with books, magazines and bowls of pot-pourri.

High-backed chairs, with gold-brown seats of Spanish leather, were scattered about and a huge screen in the same material flanked the wide mediæval fireplace.

"How perfect it is!" said Deirdre. "Don't you love living here?" She drew a deep breath of pleasure.

"Yes," the girl nodded gravely. "It's . . . home." Her voice was rather abrupt. "I don't think I could bear to leave it!" A faint shadow crossed her face. Then she gave a little laugh.

"Come along—lunch will be cold! I'll just see if Rollo's in." She led the way to a little room, an ante-chamber off the hall, octagonal shaped, with panelled walls and windows overlooking the lawns.

Dull, Venetian-red curtains framed the view and the note was repeated by a row of plates on a high shelf in Hispano-Moresque lustre.

Hyacinth peered out into the garden.

"Would you like to take your hat off here? There's a glass. Or come up to my room?"

"This will do beautifully."

Deirdre stood on tiptoe to see herself in the deep mirror, with its silvery panels and knots of flowers, each rose a different shape, in the fine old Italian workmanship.

Hyacinth flung her panama down and ran her fingers through her hair.

"I wonder where Rollo's gone." She leaned far out of the window. "I'm sure I can hear him singing somewhere. Listen!" Deirdre held her breath.

From far away they could catch the notes of a song, which gradually grew clearer: a rich and deep baritone voice, with a careless laughing note in it.

At last they could hear the words distinctly. Deirdre listened, fascinated.

Le petit vin de chez nous  
Est chose légère;  
J'en avale de grands coups  
Il ne grise guère  
Il me fait quand je le bois  
Le coeur et l'esprit plus droits,  
Et Rabelais autrefois  
En but à pleine verre.

A figure moved out rapidly from behind the great cedar and came swinging across the lawn, supple and full of youth, bareheaded, in a flannel shirt with a yellow kerchief wound round the throat.

The colour rose in Deirdre's cheeks as Hyacinth cried joyfully:

"Here he is!" And then across the intervening space: "Hurry up, Rollo! Lunch is ready. Mrs. Caradoc's here and we're hungry!"

"Right you are!" came back the voice. "I must have a wash. I'm caked in clay! You start—I'll be down in a minute." He vanished through the side door.

Deirdre blessed the short respite. This was the gipsy-faced individual she had treated as a labourer! Aware of Hyacinth's questioning glance she gathered her wits quickly together.

"He looks too young to be your father." She spoke the first words that entered her head.

"He is young!—such a priceless thing." Hyacinth laughed back. "So nice for me, I mean. He was married at nineteen, you know. He ran away with my mother, in his second year at Cambridge. She was there for the May week—her first trip to Europe, too!—and he fell in love at his college ball. Then his people made a fuss, so he just went off with her to Italy. Rollo can't *bear* being fussed, and this was the easiest way to stop it."

This simple explanation amused Mrs. Caradoc. She began to understand why the county labelled the present Squire "eccentric."

"I see. I suppose it settled the matter and that his people accepted the fact?"

"Oh, dear no! They quarrelled and quarrelled! So Rollo just stayed away. I was born the year after in a villa they took at Capri. Rollo says"—she laughed gaily—"that's why I'm so capricious! But, of course, it made matters worse. You see, I ought to have been a boy—fair, too—the Mesuriers are dark. Then suddenly, Grannie died and Rollo was sorry. We all came home and patched things up and lived here until . . . all that dreadful trouble."

She stopped, frowning. Deirdre wondered what the phrase covered. To fill the pause that prolonged itself, she asked gently:

"You grew up here?"

"Most of the time—since I was six. We came back on Grandfather's death. Rollo had to look after the place, and since then——"

The door swung wide, and the Squire entered, breaking the thread of her discourse.

"I didn't stop to change, you see. Will you excuse me?" He held out his hand to Deirdre and shook hers warmly. "I'm so glad to see you—again."

His voice dropped on the last word. The lean brown face was mischievous. In the narrow-lidded brilliant eyes were dancing imps which challenged her.

Something perverse drove her on.

"I don't think we've met before." She almost wondered at herself as she spoke coolly and pleasantly.

His head, with its thick, blue-black hair, now plastered carefully back, went a little on one side, a gesture she learnt to know later!

"Then let me . . . *hope* that you have a double?"

His voice was dry, though purposely he exaggerated his courteous manner.

"Just tell me one thing, though——" He paused as the man announced lunch and they moved forward through the hall. "If I'd said 'ma'am' to your 'double' would she have chucked me a penny?"

Deirdre laughed. It was so unexpected. She saw, too, in a flash, that behind the fun he was making their meeting easy in his puckish way.

"I'll tell you, *after* lunch, perhaps. I'm rather afraid to risk it now."

Hyacinth, however, chimed in.

"When did you meet Rollo?" she asked curiously, as they sat down at the long table on either side of the Squire beneath the line of old portraits.

"'Little pitchers,' " misquoted the host, "'should be seen and not heard.' Salt put up a hedgehog this morning—you should have been there. It was so funny. He tried 'kicking against the pricks' and gave it up

like the great apostle. Then he found a water-rat. In fact, he helped me all he knew! But I'm getting on. To-morrow, with luck, I hope to start the first bridge." He turned from his daughter to his guest.

"I'm hard at work at a water-garden. There's a stream that runs down to the lake and this I'm splitting into two and draining part of the marshy hollow. Then we shall throw bridges across and make paths with some big boulders here and there for rock-plants, and in the Autumn start ahead in real earnest—water-lilies, irises and flowering reeds. I hope you're fond of gardening? Otherwise, I shall bore you!"

"You can't bore me in that way." Her face was full of interest. "I want to learn. I've forgotten so much with all these barren years in town. How do you plant water-lilies?"

"It's quite easy." Mesurier smiled. He liked the look of his new neighbour, with her candid deep blue eyes, and simple unaffected manner. "You put the roots in osier baskets packed round with soil and weighted. These sink to the bed of the stream, the roots take hold and bit by bit the osier-twigs rot away."

"I see. What else are you going to plant?" She glanced at the dish handed her wonderingly.

"That's root-fennel—do try it," said the Squire. "'*Fennocchio*,' like you get in Italy. People here only seem to know the stronger leaf used for sauces."

Hyacinth made a faint grimace.

"It tastes like soap," she explained. "I recommend you to stick to the peas."

But Deirdre decided to try it.

The lunch was simple but well appointed; the delicate glass and fine old silver, with bowls of freshly gathered roses, and the pair of quiet, attentive servants suggested an easy affluence with none of the modern love of display. Mesurier drank light ale from a big tankard thirstily, but there was an excellent Moselle, cool, as she guessed, from the deep old cellars.

"Tell me what else you mean to grow in the water-garden?" Deirdre asked.

"Irises chiefly—all sorts and kinds. I want to get a

mass of colour. Then, of course, besides the plants comes the question of trees—almond, cherry and young laburnums. I'm going to experiment with wistaria trained along some old pillars, rather after the Japanese fashion, and I thought the paths should all lead up to a little temple on the slope as a sort of culminating point. I brought back two broken columns from Greece which will serve for the portal."

"A temple for ancestor worship?" Mrs. Caradoc suggested. "Despite those pillars it sounds to me more Japanese than Greek."

"Heaven forbid!" laughed Mesurier. "I should have to go a long way back to find an ancestor I fancied."

"Not even those famous ones—'Rollo and Ann hys wyfe'?"

As she spoke the words he glanced up quickly, as a man will when his name is uttered.

"You mean *old* Rollo—on the tomb? No—he's a bit too stiff and hide-bound. I'd rather have a pagan deity. What do you say, Hyacinth?"

"I suggest Aunt Byng!" A ripple of laughter followed the words.

"Excellent! *Unluckily*, she's alive," said the Squire grimly.

"Only half," his daughter amended. "Chris calls her a 'fly in amber.' He says that if you broke through the rocky defences you *might* find arrested life, but it's ten to one she'd vanish into a pinch of dust."

"That's like Chris," Mesurier laughed. "A neighbour of ours," he explained to Deirdre.

"Do you mean Mr. Pontefract? I met him once with the Rector."

A sudden uncontrollable impulse drove her to recount to her host how the horse and rider had flashed past her in the moonlight on her first walk.

But she did not allude to the scene in the wood.

This was no business of hers, though she wondered afresh who the girl could have been, wandering in the Squire's domain.

"Up to some mischief, I suppose." Mesurier's deep voice was careless.

Deirdre glanced at Hyacinth, cool and unmoved, occupied in skinning a peach with her long white fingers. The thought that had rankled in her mind faded quickly. She felt relieved.

"I ran across him last Sunday fishing," the Squire went on happily, "or, rather, I found his fishing-basket and promptly emptied it into the river. I'm afraid one trout was past hope, but the others all cried 'thank you.'"

"Chris would be simply furious!" Hyacinth looked up, laughing.

"Yes, he likes to play tricks himself, but he never expects the tables turned. Of course, that wasn't the real reason. I hate to see dumb creatures tortured."

"And yet," said Deirdre thoughtfully, "Nature herself is often ruthless. Beast preys upon beast. You have only to watch a stoat with a rabbit."

"They've only instinct—no reason. Hunger's the cause, not a love of amusement."

"All the same, we eat the trout." Deirdre loved an argument.

"We *needn't*. There are heaps of other things."

"But I can't see that it's more moral to kill a calf than a fish. It's really worse, in a way, as it hasn't got a sporting chance." She looked at the Squire, her eyes twinkling. "I'm inclined to think your objections æsthetic rather than strictly humane."

"You mean that the fish appeals to my eye more fully alive than dead?" he challenged.

"Not altogether." Then she laughed. "But it's not far from it!" She dared his retort.

It came swiftly.

"How well you know me! It takes a woman to jump at a truth that a man has been patiently probing for years!" His face was rather saturnine. He smoothed his hair back restlessly.

"And what is 'the truth'?" She refused to be snubbed by his somewhat arrogant manner.

"That beneath the cant we cast broadside we each of us live to please ourselves." Scorn rang in his voice. He leaned sideways across to his guest, gazing straight down into her eyes. "A dead trout is nothing

to you but domestic economy—food, in fact. To me it's a mass of dulling scales, of beautiful ardent young life squandered—the negation of movement—a shattered picture. . . .”

“Rollo!” Hyacinth's voice, eager, aggrieved, cut short the discussion. “That's a half-truth—unworthy of you. You know you *hate* to see suffering.”

Mesurier caught her up sharply.

“It's the same thing. It hurts *me*. Sheer selfishness all through. The *raison d'être* of philanthropy—to avoid the sight of unpleasant things! We none of us like the sting of pity. But we wrap it up in a beautiful cloak and call our conduct altruism! Shams . . . shams!” His voice swept out cuttingly through the high room. “Give me a man—or a woman, but that's still rarer!—who has the pluck to say, ‘I live to please myself!’”

He stopped abruptly. Leaning back in the carved arm-chair, deliberately he let his tense limbs relax, muscle by muscle. A smile grew on his lips and was mirrored in his eyes. He glanced sidelong at his guest.

“If ever you feel your temper slip,” he remarked in a genial, whimsical voice, “just let your body relax—go limp—it's a great cure. The little black dog gets frightened then and slithers down off your shoulders.”

Deirdre felt taken aback. What a mercurial creature it was! Yet his boyishness was not without charm.

“I'll remember that.” She nodded gaily, but Hyacinth was still annoyed.

“After all,” she said warmly, “if it really is the sight of pain that worries you, why did you stay with poor Olga all that night? There was no reason to sit up—the ‘vet’ could have looked after her.”

Mesurier's bright eyes narrowed. He dearly loved to tease his daughter.

“Let us think. . . . Ah, yes. If anything had happened to Olga you would have gone into mourning for weeks! And I hate long faces about the house.”

Hyacinth jumped up.

“Don't *listen* to him!” she cried. “Let's have our coffee under the cedar.”



"One minute." The host laughed and turned to Deirdre. "I'd quite forgotten! That promise of yours about your double. What would she do, Mrs. Caradoc?"

"If he said 'ma'am'?"—her eyes danced—"This, I think." She opened her purse and solemnly drew out a penny.

"Good for you!" he took it promptly, to her amusement, and touched his forehead.

"Thank ye, ma'am."

He stood up, his hand raised in benediction and began to patter quick words in a strange musical tongue.

"That's a gipsy blessing. I learnt it in Spain from an old lady under a hedge. We shared the last of my tobacco. It was raining too . . . a beastly night! If you hadn't been so generous I might have treated you to a curse!"

"What an escape!" She passed out of the window on to the lawn below. "In Spanish too?" she laughed back.

"No—a beauty I found one day in a priest's library in Perugia. He made me free of his old books—some of them were quite priceless. This is known familiarly as the '*cinque dita*' curse. It starts like this, roughly translated:

"Five fingers placed against the wall.  
Five devils incarnate answer the call."

"It's in five verses, one for each finger, and by the time you get to the thumb your damnation is complete!"

"Horrible!" She pretended to shudder. "I'm inclined to think that penny of mine was well spent." She glanced up at the tall figure with its gipsy-like face and brown bare throat, the yellow bandanna knotted loosely beneath the square arrogant chin. Again she felt that odd desire to pit her strength against his own—the primitive feminine delight of rousing a man to rebellion.

"After all," she lowered her eyes, "it *was* true philanthropy: it saved me future suffering."

Rollo glanced at her obliquely.

"Glad to see you agree with me." He wheeled round and held out his hands, both together, in foreign fashion.

"Good-bye—I'm off to my work. I'll leave you to the child's mercy. When you're utterly tired of her come down to the water garden."

Deirdre, somewhat surprised by this sudden departure, felt her hands gently seized, pressed for a second and lightly dropped.

Then he was off, striding across the velvety turf, with a swinging gait, bare-headed. His long legs carried him to the boundary of smooth lawn and he dropped down to the lower terrace heedless of the steps beyond. His voice floated back to them, gay and sweet, as he broke into song:

*"Il me fait, quand je le bois,  
Le coeur et l'esprit plus droits. . . ."*

and faded softly away into the warm sunny silence.

## CHAPTER X

FOR the next fortnight Deirdre saw her new friends continually.

She bathed with Hyacinth in the lake and now and then the Squire would join them, whenever the hour was early enough; for he rose whilst the dew was still on the ground. They would breakfast afterwards *al fresco*, in the green glade near the sleeping lodge, on bacon, cooked on a camp stove, or an omelet—at which the host excelled!

Happy, sunny gipsy days!—to Deirdre a revelation of sane, sweet intercourse with Nature, spiced by her friends' erratic talk.

Then they would motor her into Kilby to lunch at the old coaching inn and spend eager hours exploring the various curiosity shops. She was surprised at the fund of knowledge the pair displayed on these occasions; but already she had realized that beneath the girl's childish manner there were depths of thought and erudition which she owed to companionship with her father. She had read an amazing selection of books and in the course of their travels abroad Mesurier had taught her to use her young intelligence to the utmost.

He had a horror of insular prejudice and his own odd creed of life, which seemed to consist of a search for happiness with a curiously ruthless disregard for conventional rules and regulations, had led him into strange adventures, frequently shared by his young daughter.

Yet all the time they held aloof from what he called "social snares." They avoided the big crowded hotels where the British loved to surround themselves with the same atmosphere as at home and wandered from primitive inn to inn, on friendly terms with the natives.

Heavy luggage they disdained. Often they took long *journeys on foot*, knapsack on back and staff in hand,

rarely tied to time or place, but swayed by the impulse of the moment.

Deirdre's own distaste for a life within the narrow bounds of society, as glimpsed by her in her London days, and her love of beauty in Nature and Art were links that the pair recognised.

She was learning too; picking up the lost threads of country lore. For the first time for many years she found herself in harmony with her surroundings and this renewed a sense of confidence in herself. Her nerves steadied; the tired dread of a premature and barren old age gave place to a new sensation of youth and it was reflected in her appearance.

She looked, indeed, another woman, her sunburnt face glowing with health and the only shadow which dimmed her eyes fell when her thoughts turned back to Mark.

Not a line had passed between them. She had given him her banker's address and only her mother and her cousin knew the secret of Four Corners.

The flat she had left in perfect order with a new maid to help the cook, the bills paid—her duty accomplished!—on the morning she fled from it with Day.

For the short time that had intervened between her departure and the scene which had driven her to this final step she had steadily avoided Mark.

He had watched her, silent and morose, with, at moments, a cynical amusement. She had easily guessed what lay in his mind. He had treated her words as an idle threat. And yet, beneath the sense of triumph which her quiet but dramatic exit so humanly induced in her, she could not achieve a full contentment. At odd moments when she awoke from the sunny dream at Four Corners she would feel a restless anxiety and, what was almost worse to bear, a faint suspicion of cowardice.

Had she, in truth, deserted her post? Was it a conquest, after all?

Her love, crushed down, not wholly dead, warred with her pride. Her husband's face, rarely angry, would rise up, full of a curious wistfulness—the bewilderment of a lost child!

The Rector's speech still rankled, with its warning note on "influence." In vain she would argue the question out and plead with herself that if ten years of uninterrupted intercourse had failed to mitigate Mark's temper—years in which her youth and passion had spent themselves unstintedly—there was little chance in the Autumn of life to work a miracle through love.

They were better apart. He was a man who preferred a bachelor's existence. He felt no need for companionship. Temperamentally he was cold.

"After all," she thought bitterly, "I was only useful at odd moments—some one to fall back upon whenever outside interests flagged. A housekeeper—and occasional mistress. Here, at least, I can be natural; not a shadow adapting myself to the moods of a man who was never content and rarely knew his own mind."

Then, deliberately, she would turn her thoughts into another channel. Yet her scruples returned at intervals. She could not wholly blot out the past.

It was in one of these darker moods that Mesurier found her on a day when the weather had turned wet and cold with the suddenness of the English climate. Twilight had fallen very early and Day had lighted a small fire after tea in the "look-out-tower," as Deirdre called her pet room.

"It will seem a bit of company and air the place," she suggested, "and I'll bring your supper up here, mum. It's that chilly in the hall."

Deirdre had nodded assent, still absorbed in the problem of Mark. She sat before the flickering logs, a book, unopened, on her lap, watching the flames gather strength, as the wood softly hissed and crackled. Its pungent smell stirred memories of a fire lit on her honeymoon one cold night at a Rouen hotel. Mark had luxuriated in it, stretched at full length on the hearth-rug, his head pillowed on her knees. They had talked of the glorious years ahead, of the fame which should surely crown his work, building castles in the air, as lovers will, all the world over.

Meanwhile she had stroked back that thick red-gold hair of his until under her soft touch he had twisted

round, and, straining up, drawn her face down to his.

"If I succeed it will be through you," he had whispered between his lingering kisses. "I'm no good left alone—I don't think I'm really ambitious. . . . You'll have to keep me up to the mark. My old mother knew that! So it's in your hands, little woman."

"I'll try." The words had come from her heart. Now they returned, haunting her, like imps born of the wood sparks.

In her hands? And she had left him—knowing his weakness but worn out, body and soul, by his temper.

There came a soft tap at the door. Day appeared, wreathed in smiles.

"The Squire's downstairs, mum—would like to see you, but not if you're busy, I was to say."

In her faithful heart she was proud of the conquest her mistress had made at the Hall. ("It's what she wants—young life about her—instead of sour faces and cross words.") So she reasoned, reassured by the change she already marked.)

"Will you ask him to come up here?" Deirdre felt half-reluctant yet half-relieved to be dragged out of her sombre thoughts.

Mesurier was ushered in.

"How nice—I love a fire!" He crossed to it and held out one hand—the left—to her in his casual fashion, the other extended to the blaze. "I'm so glad you're both in."

"Then sit down and toast your toes," she smiled back lazily. "Drag up that arm-chair to the hearth. Have you had tea?"

"Yes—thanks." He settled down, facing the glow which lit up the rain drops that still clung to the rough tweed suit he wore.

"I'm lonely," he confided. "Hyacinth's gone to her Aunt Byng for the week-end—to be improved!"

"Your sister?"

"Yes." He glanced sideways. "It's one of those relationships one takes on trust, with a faint dislike for the hidden ways of Providence."

"Now what do you mean by that?" Deirdre smiled, but with tired eyes.

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it? We're of the same flesh and blood and that's the limit of the tie. I cordially dislike Louisa."

"I hope it's not mutual?" she asked gravely.

"Yes, thank goodness!" He stretched his arms over his head with a mighty yawn. "Sorry!—that was meant for Aunt Byng. She cordially disapproves of me. She came here this morning and told me so—made such a scene that in sheer despair I offered the child up, as sacrifice."

"Poor Hyacinth! Didn't she mind?"

"She didn't like it," the Squire admitted. "But women are more philosophical over *small* matters I think than men."

"They have to be." Deirdre sighed.

He looked at her curiously.

"I'm glad you're feeling depressed too. It's sympathetic. Even the weather has turned to tears—so hysterical, she's washed away the dam in the brook."

"No?" She roused herself at this. "Then all your work's at a standstill?"

"Most of it. May I smoke?" He pulled out a briar pipe as she nodded, filled it with tobacco and lit it with a burning twig.

For a space he puffed away in silence; then he twisted in his chair so that he could watch her face.

"What a rare companion you are!" His voice was dreamy. "You're more like a man. Most women get the fidgets if you don't chatter continuously."

Deirdre smiled at this.

"It occurred to me that 'Aunt Byng' had talked enough for one afternoon."

"She did. She said she had never known a parent so utterly criminal from the point of view of responsibility; more lacking in common sense and decency—yes! and religion—than a certain Rollo Mesurier. She went on to state her view that the fault would lie at my door if Hyacinth ran away with the chauffeur."

Deirdre laughed aloud.

"What did you say to that?"

"I pointed out the simple error. It would probably be with the gardener."

He turned his mocking brilliant eyes towards his companion's amused face.

"I spoke the truth. It's far more likely—she's very fond of Second-Best."

"Is that his name?" Deirdre wondered.

"Part of it. His revered parent has been with us since the Flood. Not this one!—Noah's disaster. And when the mantle of Elijah—(Mark the influence of Louisa!—my mind drifts back to Sunday school.)" He gave a sudden boyish laugh. "Well—when it fell on the next generation it complicated matters somewhat. You see the old chap's name is Best, so Hyacinth solved the problem by calling the son Second-Best. As a matter of fact, he's the better man of the two, but I can't dismiss the former, so I just let him potter about and amuse himself with finding fault. He has a passion for carpet bedding and long rows of funereal urns bubbling over with geraniums." The Squire's face was eloquent.

"Why not employ him as chaperone to avert the suggested family scandal?"

"I might." His voice lost its laughing note as he added, "It wouldn't be the first!"

Deirdre, slightly surprised, glanced up at the lean brown face. It looked grim and rather reckless and as her eyes met his she saw they held a searching inquiry.

He leaned forward in his chair.

"Do you mean to say that you've lived here for a whole month and met the Rector with his wife and 'our dear Mrs. Pontefract' without hearing the 'true facts' (I like that expression, don't you?—with its element of honest doubt) concerning what humbugs call my 'misfortune' and the unco' guid my 'deserts'?"

"No-o." Deirdre looked embarrassed. "Mrs. Gage—" she broke off and started afresh. "I think perhaps I'm supposed to be rather dull, which means that I detest gossip."

"I believe you," said Mesurier simply. "Another nice



masculine trait." He smoothed back his black hair, staring absently into the flames. Then he pulled himself together.

"You'd better know it," he said abruptly.

He gave her one of his side-long glances and added with a puckish smile.

"The *mise-en-scène* is admirable for confidences, isn't it? Firelight and a pretty woman . . . the lonely cottage . . . a stormy night."

"Don't talk like that!" Impulsively the words slipped from her lips; the colour had mounted to her cheeks.

"Sorry." He stretched out his hand and touched her arm like a penitent child. "I'm a brute!—to *you*. . . Such a real soul! But I'd like to tell you. May I, please?"

"If you wish to." Her voice was low. She was oddly moved by his apology—the sudden humility of the man.

"I do. I'd rather tell you myself. Most people don't understand. I think you will—you're . . . different.

"Well——" He resumed his old position, his head back against the chair, long legs stretched out towards the cheerful glowing logs. "I daresay you've heard how I married? At nineteen—a boy's adventure! That's what it comes to when I look back to those early days. But I don't regret it—not that part—it was too ideal." He paused for a moment, his face sad.

"I met her at Cambridge, one May-week, with her mother—a little shadowy woman, always wrapped in a fleecy shawl—a sort of Greek chorus to her daughter! Eulalie was two years my senior, very fair, like Hyacinth, but tiny, with hands and feet like flowers. . . .

"Pretty wasn't the word for her. She was brilliant too—as a butterfly!—vivacious with that audacity of quite young American girls which yet is combined with innocence. She 'dared' me into loving her. Teased and snubbed and petted me, all in a breath—bewildering, like a rose that is offered and snatched away.

"I was mad for her! I don't know now if she ever truly cared for me. She loved romance and ad-

miration, and—as it happened—I gave her both. My people utterly refused to sanction our sudden engagement. I had shewn her pictures of my home and, I think, in a way, the Hall impressed her. You know how most Americans, though they laugh at tradition and long descent, revere our old historical places? I suppose the idea appealed to her—in a glorified way—to be mistress of Weavers. She was very attractive, dainty and cool. Men at Cambridge raved about her. She laughed and flirted with them all and made me at moments wildly wretched. I was terrified of losing her. Eventually we ran away, were married in London hastily, and caught the night boat, for Venice.”

He stopped to pick up a smouldering log that had fallen forward in the grate.

“Didn’t her mother know?” asked Deirdre.

“All the time! But Eulalie pretended she didn’t. That came out later. It added to the romance, you see! She was never straight with me—from the start.”

Deirdre’s face was pitiful. She guessed the tragedy ahead.

“Anyhow, I owe her this—a few wonderful memories. It’s the one possession in this world even a woman cannot steal! There we were—two children—drinking our first deep draught of life with Venice for a golden background—a beautiful girl . . . a boy’s first passion. . . .

“We must have looked an odd pair—a modern Paul et Virginie. I remember still how people stared and how Eulalie drank it in! But it couldn’t last. The first cloud grew out of love from a clear sky. She didn’t want a child, it seemed, dreaded it—when it was too late! I learned then how slight was the hold I had upon her. She turned on me. She was ill, complaining, disillusioned, and I was at my wit’s end. I offered to take her back to her mother, or to pay the latter’s passage over. No—she would rather be alone—travel about—try and forget it! We drifted on from place to place and finally settled in Capri. There was a pink villa there which took her fancy; we furnished it and there Hyacinth was born.”

A little silence followed the words; then he took up his story again.

"After that things improved. The dread was gone and for a time she was glad to laze in that blue land, play with the child, and allow me to worship! Our garden looked out over the bay, with the far-off cap of Vesuvius and the orange trees were all in bloom—I can smell them still in my dreams. . . . Then she grew restless again, avid for movement, the life of a town. We went to Rome, on to Vienna, then to the Alps for the summer.

"Everywhere she made friends—without the slightest discrimination! Heavens! the awful people we met—vulgar, empty, ostentatious. All she asked was a certain 'smartness.' Once or twice we fell out and then she punished me steadily by a cool disdain. She made me feel what a 'boy' I was—that she flirted with 'men'—and at last she would bring me to her feet. It's the secret of life: the one who loves bears the heaviest handicap; it's your cool and utterly heartless woman who can play as she likes with mankind.

"Well, at the end of two years my mother died and we went home. Eulalie prepared for the part with an eagerness which surprised me. I had not realised at Cambridge the significance attached to my house!" He smiled rather bitterly. "But she had reckoned without my father. They disliked each other at first sight and the long, slow battle began—tradition versus modernity.

"Everything was to go on as my mother had planned—the old régime. You can picture the wrath of the young and ardent pioneer from the New World brought up sharp against the rock of British custom and prejudice. My father was adamant. Here was a man she could not move. He was never discourteous; his manner was perfect. Yet he made her feel an alien—in a sense a 'pretender' under his roof—in no way worthy to be consulted.

"The odd part of it was that I did not realise the position; not then—that came later. I was stunned at first by my mother's death and I slipped back into the life of my boyhood unconsciously. What was strange

to my wife—the feudal system—was to me a feature of home existence; and I loved the place with all my soul—every stick and stone in it! I was tired to death of a wandering life and the noisy glitter of hotels, to say nothing of the people Eulalie found so amusing!

“Still, after six months or so, when my wife suggested a visit to town to meet her mother and some friends who were due by the next boat, I realized that a house of mourning must be depressing at her age, and I took her up to a quiet hotel, settled her in and then returned.”

He glanced across at Deirdre.

“You must remember at the time that I was barely twenty-four.” There was faint pleading in his voice. “If I’d had more experience I might have guessed it was not prudent to leave her to her own devices.”

“But her mother was with her?” Deirdre protested.

“Yes—a very feeble guardian. Neither a wise nor far-seeing woman, with a totally different standard from ours. They stayed up there for three months, on one excuse or another. I ran up occasionally but I couldn’t persuade her to return. She was living in a whirl of pleasure and I rarely had her to myself. This brought us to July. Then I got a curious letter to say that my wife was coming home and bringing ‘Mamma and some friends.’ Would I have ‘six bedrooms ready’?”

“I felt a little surprised at this—annoyed too. She might have asked if the invasion suited my father. However, he took it very well. Honestly, I think he was curious to see what her friends would be like!” Mesurier laughed but with little mirth.

Deirdre, watching his expression, raised her eyebrows. The Squire nodded.

“Awful!—a perfect menagerie! But the worst of the whole collection was a man called Kellogg—James Kellogg. A type I should think who would be vetoed in any land—including his own. He used to swagger about the lawn in a silk shirt and cummerbund, dancing pumps and striped socks, a huge cigar between his teeth, varied at meal times by a toothpick! A great swarthy hulking brute with lips like a negro and insolent eyes.

Money oozed out of him—it was the only topic he knew! He priced everything in the house and capped it with his own possessions. He sneered at all our British ways, our lack of ‘hustle’ and enterprise, our ‘fool-notions’ on gentle birth. I remember he called the hall a tomb and suggested a bar at one end with a pianola might cheer it up! And Eulalie laughed and encouraged him—flirted too. They danced, they sang—he had an abominable parlour trick he called ‘vamping’ an accompaniment—they drove the horses—and let them down; they picked the flowers and rifled the fruit.

“And all the time my father watched them, quiet, sardonic, the courteous host—until I could have died for shame!” Mesurier writhed in his chair.

“Horrible.” Deirdre guessed what this boy of twenty-four had suffered, too young to control his guests, too old to quarrel with them!

“At last I put my foot down. Kellogg had kissed one of the maids and the housekeeper came to me and complained. I had it out with Eulalie. I told her they’d stayed long enough. It wasn’t a very pleasant scene and in the end I lost my temper.

“That night she ran away with Kellogg.”

He paused for a moment, then went on quickly.

“I followed the pair up to town. I thrashed him—the only bit of pleasure I got out of it all! I told him it was a ‘British custom’—one of the many he despised! I left him to patch up his face—and, incidentally, my own.” He laughed more naturally. “A strong chap but slow on his feet—ate and drank too much for fitness. Then came the bitterest part.” He shaded his eyes with his hand as though he mistrusted the light of the fire.

“Your wife?” Deirdre whispered the words as the silence grew unbearable.

“Yes. She was honest, for once! She told me that she loved Kellogg—‘some man’, not a mere boy—that ‘baronial halls made her tired,’ she’d as soon live in a museum; that she’d never really been happy with me!—That’s what hurt most of all. She’d ‘pretended,’ hoping *things* would improve. It was all *sham* from start to

finish! She said she'd never cared for me—that she felt sick when I touched her. . . .

"As for the child, I could keep it. It was 'half English, anyhow.' She was going to start life afresh—'real life'—with James Kellogg!

"I think I said something here about her mother. She laughed at me, told me not to 'worry any,' 'Momma' herself had been divorced. Kellogg 'would get that fixed up later'—once they were 'back in God's country!'

"And all the time there she was, dainty as a china doll, with no heart and no conscience.

"In the end she held out her hand, smiling, and wanted to 'part friends'—as though she'd paid me a long visit and was thankful it had come to an end."

"What a tragedy!" Deirdre pictured the scene with a feeling of nausea.

"Or comedy?" Mesurier smiled, but his lips twisted with the effort.

"The tragedy came a fortnight later. They sailed—all three—by the *Medora*."

Deirdre started.

"Not *that* ship . . . ?"

"Yes—went down—all hands on board." He added in a strained voice:

"It was before the days of wireless; a frightful storm—no boats could live."

"How dreadful!" She stared at him, shocked.

"So I've never—really—been able to hate her. Of all people . . . Eulalie! She wasn't brave." He bit his lips. "God alone knows how Kellogg behaved."

Silence fell between the pair but after a minute the Squire turned, smiling.

"I say—may I have a drink? Anything—I'm so frightfully dry."

"Of course. Just touch that bell." She felt relieved by the natural tone in which he spoke.

It seemed to hurry her back to the present, away from that far-off scene of horror.

Her face was a trifle white, he thought, and when Day brought the whiskey he insisted on Deirdre's joining him.

"Do be friendly? I can't drink alone. I feel guilty, too, you know."

She smiled back into his eyes.

"You needn't. I can't express myself—but I think you can guess my sympathy."

Rather shyly, she held out her hand.

Mesurier took it. Bending his head he just touched it with his lips. Then he looked up, his face grave.

"That's friendship," he said, "not . . . twaddle!"

The humour of it caught them both. It set free laughter—that healing spirit.

"I'm glad you explained it." Her eyes twinkled.

Mesurier lifted his glass on high.

"To the Turnpike Lady!" He saw her start. "Oh, yes—Chris told me—and how he came to 'pay toll.' Nothing is hid in a place like Weavers! Which reminds me—I ought to be off."

He put his tumbler down with a sigh. "Unless, of course, you invite me to supper!" But he stood up as he spoke.

Deirdre felt the faint challenge in his mischievous glance. He was testing her. Should she be conventional and turn him out? She decided quickly.

"Wait till you hear what the supper is! A cup of soup—we could toss for that! Cold chicken, baked potatoes and salad, quite enough for two. Mrs. Slack has made a blancmange—a horrible thing, like a dead pudding. *But*—" she paused dramatically—"there's strawberry jam to help it down."

"Good!" He laughed like a schoolboy. "Then I'll stay. That settles it!"

## CHAPTER XI

THE supper was a cheery one. Day performed a miracle, revising the simple menu.

With the remains of some cold salmon she served up a mayonnaise, grilled the chicken, hid the blancmange and substituted a sweet omelet.

The Squire did justice to the meal and won Day's heart by his appetite and the way in which he teased Deirdre, vowing she was a sybarite.

They went back to the fire-lit room for their coffee, resuming their old position on either side of the deep grate, in the mellow mood that food induces, together with good company.

"When does Hyacinth return?" Deirdre asked lazily, as she lay back, watching the smoke curl up from her cigarette.

"Monday. I put my foot down there. She can't stand Byng either. He's a pompous ass—our member, you know—with but one topic, Tariff Reform. The first husband was very different. A naval man who had seen life in foreign lands, broad-minded. I can't think why he married Louisa! Luckily she was abroad all that time with Eulalie. She came home a month too late—after I'd gone off with the child."

"You didn't stay at Weavers, then?"

"No. Do you care to hear the rest? It's rather amusing in some ways." He smiled. "I'm afraid of boring you!"

"I'll stop you the moment that you do."

"Honest Injun?" he laughed back. "Very well—though I feel so lazy after my most excellent supper. Well——" he paused to finish his coffee. "Where did I get to? Oh, I know. I came home from London that night, walked up from the station and slipped in by the back way. I didn't want any explanations. Time enough in the morning, so I doubled up the back stairs



to my old room in the tower where I used to sleep as a boy. But as I passed the nursery wing I heard the sound of a child crying; that low exhausted sobbing, you know—pitiful! I couldn't stand it. I went in and found the mite all alone in the dark. The nurse, I suppose, was gossiping in the servants' hall. I couldn't blame her—the whole place was upside down. You can guess that a scandal like that is enough to disorganise a quiet house.

"I soothed Hyacinth by degrees and carried her off to my own quarters, leaving a pencilled line to explain.

"She slept, curled up in my arms all night—such a wee soft thing! That began our comradeship. I lay awake, thinking things out. It seemed to me that here we were, the pair of us, just—unwanted!"

His voice grew a trifle hoarse on the word.

"I know——" Deirdre's face was full of a keen sympathy. It did not escape the Squire's dark eyes, but he went on without remark. "I think you'll understand what I mean when I say I was utterly sick of women! I vowed I'd bring the child up to be something different if I could. To speak the truth and *think* the truth—to abhor sham in every form; to be fearless and unashamed, with the candid outlook of a boy.

"She was all that was left to me out of the wreck of my own youth. An odd thing, when you think of it, that a woman like Eulalie, feigning love, utterly frivolous, dreading childbirth, could yet produce this perfect creature—for perfect she was from her golden head to her tiny feet. Nature is wonderful in her ways! She preserves the balance—against man's folly. . . ."

For a moment he was silent; then he took up his story once more.

"I saw my father in the morning. Poor old boy—he was very quaint! He hated the notion of divorce. We'd done all sorts of mad things, but somehow we'd stopped short at that. On the other hand, he was fiercely anxious to get in the first blow. He had the vaguest ideas on the subject with confused notions of law in America. He thought that Kellogg, once home again, could blacken the name of Mesurier and sail in with flying colours!

"He sent for his solicitor and the tedious legal business began. I left it all in his hands, spending most of my spare time with Hyacinth, watching the nurse and learning the ways of a child. My secret plan was gathering shape as the long days and nights dragged on.

"Then came the tragic news. That finished everything! My old father was awfully good but he could not hide the relief he felt. My one thought was to get away. I remember that old Pontefract—'Parson Jack' he used to be called, a sportsman of the finest type—was the only one who approved my project. He broke down my father's objections. I went off with the child, alone."

He paused and Deirdre, surprised, spoke the thought in her mind.

"Without a nurse?"

"Yes." He laughed. "I'll never forget the first day I gave her her tub and tried to dress her! Such a hopeless confusion of buttons; she used to wear long gaiters with eighteen to each leg! But Hyacinth was wild with delight. She was just old enough, you see, to look upon it as a game. She was very healthy, luckily—a dear mite, full of life.

"You should have seen her down in Spain, where we drifted later in the year and she first learned to love the sea. She used to go in on my shoulder, laughing for joy as the waves splashed up, naked as the day she was born, with her bright hair in a halo about her. She never knew the false shame of lectures on modesty; she was like a healthy young animal, glorying in a sense of freedom.

"I taught her to love her Mother Earth—wind-swept spaces and open skies—to know the birds and the trees and the flowers, to run bare-footed, swift as a boy. And little by little I started lessons. But we always treated them like games! She picked up languages easily as we wandered through France into Italy. One of our games was to vie with each other in finding as many words as we could to express the same object and later on to translate the same idea. In this way she grew proficient

in Southern tongues rapidly. It was so quaint to hear her talk in her babyish way—polyglot chatter!

"We avoided all the big towns and lived a sort of gipsy life. At last I chartered a small yacht and we dawdled down the Adriatic through those beautiful Greek Isles—days I still recall with delight. Hyacinth, of course, was skipper!

"At Corfu we got a wire saying my father had had a stroke. This brought me home post haste. For a time the old man rallied and I promised him I'd settle down and look after the property. He found his grandchild amusing." Mesurier smiled at some recollection. "He was rather shocked at her education, but proud of her strength and her beauty. He used to be wheeled down to the lake and watch her dive into the water. Hyacinth was much annoyed because he insisted on a costume!

"He passed away peacefully one evening in his sleep and since then we've lived at the Hall, with an occasional trip abroad to break the monotony. Of course, I got her tutors later—I wouldn't have governesses. What do you think of the result?"

He glanced across at Deirdre.

"I don't think it could be bettered." Her simple answer rang sincere.

"No? I wonder." His face was thoughtful. "The trouble is—what lies ahead?" He twisted sideways in his chair. "I'm worried—it's very absurd. Louisa . . ." he paused. "She seems to think I'm acting unfairly by the child—that she ought to 'come out' and have gaieties."

"Why don't you put it to Hyacinth?"

"I have. She says she's perfectly happy—doesn't want to leave Weavers. Hates the idea of a season in town. Lord knows I do myself!"

"She's very young," said Deirdre, "and you've taught her to speak the truth, so why question her decision?"

"I'm glad you accept it as final." He nodded his head thoughtfully. "It's a relief. I don't want to alter our life in any way. I can't bear the thought of *Hyacinth being spoiled*—her simplicity and her open speech

—by the cant and humbug that underlies so much that is conventional. Yet sometimes I feel that she needs now a woman friend——” he broke off and glanced across at his companion. There was shy appeal in his expression.

“And hasn’t she one?” Her earnest eyes were more eloquent than her words.

“You mean that? I know she likes you and I hoped . . . May I speak plainly?”

She nodded and the Squire went on:

“There are few women I could trust to influence Hyacinth. But you’re . . . different. I’ve always felt it. You come from the same star as we do.

“You’ll say, perhaps, that our friendship has been a sudden, rather erratic affair. I believe that’s true of all great friendships; they’re instinctive from the very start. As a proof that I mean what I say, I’ve never talked to any woman as I have to you to-night. I’ve never imagined that I *could*. . . . Openly—about Eulalie.”

A little silence fell between them. Deirdre’s hands were clasped together rather tightly in her lap. The lamp behind her sent a glow over her soft ruffled hair, drawing out red lights. Her face was half hidden in the shadow.

The Squire watched her, wondering a little, trying to read her secret thoughts.

“Perhaps,” he said, “you imagine——”

“No.” She leaned forward quickly. “Please don’t misunderstand me. The truth is you can’t guess the value of the gift you offer: what your friendship and Hyacinth’s already have meant to me—the sweetness of it! I was utterly lonely when I came here. I wanted to creep away and forget . . . all sorts of painful things—broken ideals, vanished hopes. I’m not—really—a happy woman; perhaps not a very wise one. But if I could help, could feel that my life were useful to a fellow creature, it would be the greatest joy to me. I mean this—from the depths of my soul. As to my liking Hyacinth, there’s not much difficulty there.” She smiled, her mouth in tender curves. “I lost my heart

to her long ago! So if I can be of any use—to her, or you . . .” she hesitated.

“You are—already.” He stood up, stirred by a curious restlessness. “May I come to you when I want advice? It’s sometimes hard to be father and mother and pal all rolled into one.” He laughed, then his face went grave again. “Thank Heaven she has no secrets! I don’t think she’d ever deceive me. But she’s growing up—*ay de mi!* She’s no longer just a child. And she *must* be happy. I’ve learnt my lesson. There’s no love based on regrets. If she wants gaiety, balls and so forth”—he shrugged his shoulders—“she’ll have to have them. I’ve never denied her anything that wasn’t against the laws of health.”

“But some day she must learn denial. It can’t be roses all the way.”

“It ought to be. It’s man’s fault if he chooses to gather only the thorns.”

His voice was so calm and confident that Deirdre glanced up, surprised, at the dark face with its strong mouth and the brilliant eyes, full of dancing lights.

“Then you don’t believe——” she paused for a moment—“that we’re put here in order to suffer and work out our salvation through it?”

“Never!” He flung out the word like a challenge. “I wouldn’t insult the Almighty by imputing such an idea to Him. You’ve only to look at the unspoilt things—the mountains, the sea, the birds and the flowers—to recognise the original scheme: beauty and love and happiness. To remember that when the earth was made the morning stars sang together and the ‘sons of God shouted for joy.’”

He went on with a whimsical smile.

“If your theory held water, why did the Garden of Eden exist? God could have planked down Adam and Eve in the back yard of some hideous town!”

Deirdre laughed. She could not resist it.

“I might suggest that, so far as we know, towns were not invented then.”

“Exactly. And isn’t it obvious that if we’d been intended to live huddled up in foul air they’d have held

their place in the Creation? For God saw that *all* was good . . . that is, beautiful. Was beauty meant to produce sorrow—or happiness?" His voice was triumphant.

"Then, if so . . . *why?*" She threw out her hands with a gesture of faint despair.

"My dear child, we've muddled it." He stood smiling down at her, and she felt his subtle dominance: the odd charm of the man. "We've woven all sorts of senseless rules around the original conception. I'm inclined to think marriage is one! But perhaps it's only modern conditions? The most pernicious to my mind is the glorification of martyrdom. I'm not referring to the Saints. According to them they had all to gain by their sufferings and I shrewdly suspect that fanaticism brings in its wake an anæsthetic for physical pain. You have only to study Eastern religions—the Yogi is a good example and the Dancing Dervish is another.

"What I refer to is the way children are taught to be unselfish, to cramp their natural, healthy desires and be proud of the fact—little humbugs! They rarely combine altruism with a sane and healthy happiness and this produces morbidity, an unnatural tax on existence. They *pretend* they like to be unselfish and grow up hugging a lie."

"Then, granted that, where's the remedy?"

"Ah. . . !" The Squire moved across with a quick step to the window. He opened it wide and let the air blow in, fresh and sweet, with the savour of the rain-washed earth.

"Come here."

She followed him obediently and, conscious of the same impulse, leaned out of the narrow casement, feeling the breeze play on her face.

For a moment they stayed there, drinking it in, their shoulders touching, perfectly still.

"You mean"—she spoke in a whisper, awed by the beauty of the night—"we should get back to Nature's laws?"

Mesurier smiled, well content.

"You don't find humbug there. She teaches one to

*think straight.* To live one's life outside convention, to be pitiful to weaker creatures, to glory in one's own strength. To be happy, in fact, being one's self. Not a poor copy of a man hedged in by half-truths and the fear of the world's opinion. To air one's soul and one's body—to be mortal, not ape divinity."

"And *you're* happy?" She moved sideways to glance at the face of the speaker.

"I try to be," he said simply. "It's really a part of my religion."

"Then you never look back?" As she uttered the words she felt a sudden twinge of remorse. But Mesurier did not fear the knife. He answered her with the same candour.

"Not willingly. I look forward. It's the habit of a gardener. One labours and sweats and sows the seed and leaves the miracle to God. If only people would do that instead of dabbling in metaphysics!"

"You don't think it's any good leading a life you feel is unnatural for the sake of any influence you may have on a fellow-being?"

The Squire laid a hand on her arm. "Does he *want* the influence?" he asked. "Yield to it—reap comfort from it?"

"No." The word was dragged from her.

"And meanwhile it is cramping you—wearing you out with the strain?"

She wondered at his intuition.

"But that might be my own weakness."

"That's a side-issue," he frowned slightly. "It's the same old question I'm putting to you. Does it lead to *happiness*? For either or for both of you?"

She shook her head mournfully.

"Then break away. Give Nature a chance. I don't believe in human patching. But I do believe in miracles." His hand tightened on her arm.

Again a silence fell between them. Far away over the church a single star shone clear above the drifting, ragged clouds. From the earth rose the benediction of plant and flower, fresh from the rain.

"Hyacinth has been one to me," Mesurier went on

softly. "Before all that hopeless business I never guessed what a child could mean. It's drawn me nearer to the earth—I've won a simpler conception of life. I've learnt after all my hours of rebellion to place faith in a woman again. She has never deceived me; she never will. She's loyal to the depth of her soul—mine, all mine, in a sense my work—in more than one way my salvation.

"So you see"—his hand fell from her arm—"what one of your sex took away another gave back—the law of balance. And now, just as I'm feeling worried"—he smiled down into her face—"a friend drops out of the blue sky, with a little bit of it left in her eyes: the blue of the evening, deep as a violet."

He laughed lightly as though to cover a note of tenderness in his voice.

"Good night, Blue Eyes! I'm going home—comforted. Sleep well."

Before she could answer he had gone, light-footed, noiseless and swift.



## CHAPTER XII

"AND who is Mrs. Caradoc?"

Under the speaker's heavy weight the garden chair creaked ominously and the Rector's wife gave the supports an anxious glance, her thoughts divided.

But Mrs. Byng's imperious eyes were demanding an immediate response. They seemed to say: "Keep to the subject. If I fall, I fall!—but I *will* have an answer."

"I really don't know much about her." Mrs. Gage's freckled face, flushed with her recent game of tennis, took on a still deeper shade as her visitor said in a tone of reproof:

"But I understood that the Rector had met some of her people somewhere?"

"Oh, yes. I quite forgot." Mrs. Gage looked apologetic. "In a former parish—years ago. Her mother-in-law—her husband too."

"Then there is a husband?" The catechism recommenced ruthlessly.

Mrs. Gage, helpless, assented. She feared and disliked the member's wife, yet was flattered by this sudden visit. She liked the thought that the Gorseton Manor car was now outside her gate for the village to note; as it certainly would!

What added to her nervousness was the fact that her partner in the game, interrupted by Mrs. Byng, was a Kilby youth whom the grand lady could not be expected to recognise.

He could be seen on the other side of the tennis lawn, industriously hunting for a missing ball on the border of the kitchen garden.

"If only he has the sense to stay there!" Mrs. Gage, with half her mind, observed to herself as she debated with the remainder of the meagre brains at her possession whether her attitude towards Mrs. Caradoc should be "*protective*"—or the reverse!

"My niece, Hyacinth Mesurier, has never once seen the husband." Mrs. Byng was driving on with her sledge-hammer detective work.

On her way to the Hall, over the hedge, she had caught sight of the Rector's wife and decided to run the latter to earth and ferret out all she could about this new and sudden friendship for an unknown (and pretty) stranger.

"I understand Mr. Caradoc is a busy man." Mrs. Gage darted a look at the dread lady of the Manor. "He finds it rather difficult to get away just now from town."

"In August?" Mrs. Byng sniffed.

It was a frequent habit of hers; but she did it grandly, like all her actions. Her high arched nose, with its fine-cut nostrils was the most marked feature of her face. It balanced the preponderance of chin which Time had seen fit to double. She was fully as tall as the Squire, but older and heavier; a massive woman with iron-grey hair and straight black brows under which a pair of piercing eyes raked the world around her with conscious hauteur.

"And what does he do?" she went on severely.

"He's an architect, I believe."

"Oh." It was said with condescension.

Mrs. Gage, whose father had been a Kilby builder, fidgetted.

"Nice people, my husband tells me. Old Mrs. Caradoc was thought a good deal of in the place where they lived. Quite the old-fashioned type——" She paused.

"And this one—from all accounts—quite the new!"

At last the Rector's wife had her clue.

"Unconventional, perhaps, though, of course, it doesn't do to judge from first impressions." She smiled, pensive. "But it certainly seems a trifle strange that she lives there all alone." She twisted the racket in her hands. "I've seen very little of her. I called—my husband wished me to—and dear Mrs. Pontefract went with me, but I can't say that we, either of us, found very much in common."

"She doesn't play tennis, perhaps?" Mrs. Byng's dark eyes were blank and her voice was smooth. It was difficult to detect if a joke were intended.

But Mrs. Gage had her suspicions.

"No—o, I don't think so." Her round, hot face—not unlike a tortoise-shell cat's—beneath its halo of russet hair wore a slightly shrewish expression.

"She appears to spend most of her time gardening—or rather learning it—up at the Hall. Of course, Mr. Mesurier is such an authority on the subject."

The deck-chair creaked again.

"So I understand from Hyacinth. She's been staying with me for a week-end."

Mrs. Byng stared straight ahead across the well-kept tennis court. The other's eyes, following hers, made out the back of the youth from Kilby on all fours, with racket outstretched, burrowing under a gooseberry bush.

"My niece has taken a fancy to her and you know what my brother is—*so* kind-hearted!" Again came that aristocratic sniff. "We're on our way there now. I've my son home for three days' leave." She rose as she spoke. "I promised him I would only stay a few minutes."

"But won't he come in and have some tea?"

Out of the corner of her eye Mrs. Gage could see her partner strolling towards them across the grass, his hair ruffled, a vivid tie—in the Kilby Cricket Club colours—floating from under his left ear, pleased expectancy on his face.

So it was with inward relief that she saw her guest was bent on departure.

"Most annoying," she said to herself. "If only she'd called yesterday she'd have found the Borodales playing here. But it's just like her to peer through the hedge and catch me at a disadvantage!"

"I've stopped your tennis quite long enough," Mrs. Byng was saying sweetly. "Remember me to the Rector. I suppose he's busy—in the parish."

Mrs. Gage could have slapped her. She was well aware that local opinion condemned her for her love of the game and the way in which it clashed at times with

what the village called her "duty." Only her friend, Mrs. Pontefract, was sympathetic on the subject and agreed smoothly when Dora Gage with her most pussycat expression would declare vehemently: "I was never *meant* for a clergyman's wife!"

"And your little girl—where is she now? I haven't seen her for some time." Mrs. Byng was marking time as she billowed down the short drive.

"She's with my sister by the sea. We thought a change would do her good. I think she's worked too hard at school."

"Growing too fast," Mrs. Byng decided.

The car stood in the road beyond. In the driving seat a slim young man was smoking a cigarette. He sprang down at their approach.

"Hullo, Mrs. Gage! How are you? Flourishing? You look it." He shook hands warmly. "Now, Mater, up you skip! We're ever so late. . . . *There* she goes!" He hoisted her in with a breezy laugh.

The rector's wife smiled broadly behind her ponderous visitor's back. She knew of old that this only son was the one person in the world who refused to treat the local tyrant with the deference she expected.

"Quite comfy?" He tucked the end of her drab coat in neatly and smiled lovingly up at her.

"Yes, my dear," said Mrs. Byng. "Now, remember, I don't like going fast."

"Righto!" He started the engine and slipped into the seat beside her.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Gage. Give my love to the Rector." And they were off with a faint desire on the part of the car to run backwards.

The sandy-haired woman stood for a moment watching them breast the hill and disappear out of sight.

"He's a nice boy—that young Trollope. Odd he should be a son of hers! I suppose he takes after his father, the old admiral. 'Up you skip!'" She echoed the words. "I must really tell Meg that. An insufferable woman, Mrs. Byng! I hate her more each time I see her."

She started as a voice behind called her by name and,

turning, saw the Rector wheeling his bicycle wearily up the steep incline.

"Bother!" she said to herself. "Now, of course, he'll want his tea. We shall never get that sett finished."

She moved to meet him reluctantly.

Gage's serious face brightened.

"I've been to see Eliza Trippett. She's worse to-day, poor woman. I think we must send her something, Dora—good soup or some meat jelly. The doctor says her life depends on keeping up her slender strength." He slipped a hand through his wife's arm as they turned in at the Rectory gate.

"Will you see to it?" as she made no response.

"Really, Jim," Mrs. Gage frowned, "it's very tiresome just now. Cook is making jam this week. And you know what she is!"

"Shall I talk to her?"

"No, for goodness' sake, don't! You'll only make things worse. Oh, dear!" she sighed deeply.

"It's a sad case," pleaded Gage. "Do try and manage it, Dora. If not"—his face brightened—"I wonder if Mrs. Caradoc——"

His wife wheeled round, surprised.

"Mrs. Caradoc?" She stared. "What has she got to do with it?"

"Didn't I tell you? I'm sure I meant to. She's an acquisition in the parish. She finds out where help is needed through Mrs. Slack and is most generous. Wise, too—not indiscriminate. I ran across her at poor Bowley's when that child of his was knocked down by a motor just outside her door. Since then, several times I've found her doing good by stealth. She's a nice woman. I like her extremely."

"Dear me! I ought to be jealous!" His wife laughed a little shrilly. "It's odd you should be talking of her. I've just had Mrs. Byng here, putting me through a catechism as to the lady's social credentials. As a matter of fact, I think Mrs. Byng is rather nervous about the Squire. Mrs. Caradoc's *always* there." She said the words with obvious meaning.

"And why not?" asked the Rector. "If you ask me,

I think it's what Hyacinth needs—a woman friend. I'm glad to hear of the intimacy."

"Yes—if it's only Hyacinth!" Mrs. Gage looked mysterious. "Chris Pontefract, too, I hear, finds her friendship a solace. A pity. You know how dear Meg has had to suffer in the past. As for the Squire, that's his own lookout. He's above all conventions. We realize that!" She laughed with a touch of malice. "All the same it's hardly wise for him to be seen coming out of Mrs. Caradoc's gate at midnight. Yes, that's a fact! Luke Gubbins told Fanny all about it. He was fetching the doctor to his wife a week ago when she was confined, and he saw it, with his own eyes. I really think it's a little imprudent."

The Rector's face went suddenly stern.

"Perhaps Gubbins mistook the time. And besides, if Hyacinth was with him, I don't see why they shouldn't stay to any hour, if they chose to."

"She wasn't," his wife responded quickly. "It was the week-end that she spent at Gorseton. Whilst we are on this subject, Jim, can you tell me why Mr. Caradoc *never* comes down to Four Corners'?"

"I understand that he's too busy. He can't get away from his office."

"In *August*?" She echoed Mrs. Byng.

"Yes. I suppose with his profession they take advantage of fine weather."

"I ought to know all about that!" She laughed lightly as the Rector placed his bicycle in the porch and followed her across the lawn.

One of her idiosyncrasies was to pretend since his death that her father had been an architect. It helped her in her social schemes.

She had this in common with "Mrs. Chris"—a profound mistrust of that wide gulf which separates "town" from "county." Both of them had lived in Kilby in their early days—and strove to forget it!

Mrs. Pontefract had been the only child of a local brewer. A prosperous man, he had turned his business into a company and retired to an ornate country-house he had built three miles out of Weavers, steadily acquir-

ing land until at last he had needed an agent. Pontefract had filled the post and eventually married the rich man's daughter, despite the disparity in their ages and—still more serious—in their outlook.

Meg Saunders had been at school with Dora Shadwell. It was a friendship in a sense based on defence. Both ambitious, they had felt the difficulties facing them. The rich but ugly girl had helped the poor but more attractive one, mounting her, lending her finery, and in return the latter had drawn to the great, empty, gorgeous house a scattering of single men amused by Dora's kittenish ways.

The bachelor Rector had succumbed in a weak moment to these charms. To the surprise of the whole county Pontefract had followed suit, marrying "that Saunders girl!"

Heaven alone knew to what straits he was put before he swallowed the bait.

His father had held the living at the gift of the late squire, Chris being the youngest of six sons and three daughters.

"Parson Jack" had been dearly loved; but the Pontefracts had another claim to local consideration. The sporting Rector had been born at Gorseton Manor in the days when his father was Master of the Hounds. The house had been theirs for three generations.

He had come to grief financially through no fault of his own, save the minor effects of a large hospitality, in a terrible year of bank failures.

Many people had been ruined when Kilby was added to the list and the Manor had gone with the rest under the auctioneer's hammer.

Later on Byng had bought it when, two years after the admiral's death, he had married Mesurier's widowed sister and decided to stand for the county.

Chris was immensely popular; not so his rich wife. She was tactless, stupid and wildly jealous. She quarrelled with half the women around because they were friendly with her husband.

He tried hard to keep the peace, but resented the fact

that his wife's lectures were followed up by the drastic measure of cutting down his pocket money.

She could not bear Chris out of her sight and her want of confidence drove the man into petty deceits that were foreign to him in his dealings with his boyhood friends. Then a sudden stroke of luck altered their relative positions. A distant cousin, sorry for Chris, left him a small but regular income. Meg's martyrdom began.

Chris would dash up to town, disappear for week-ends shooting with people who omitted an invitation for the wife, and return to meet sullen temper, hysterical outbursts and angry words.

Mrs. Gage was the confidante, the Rector a hopeless go-between. In the depths of his heart he pitied Chris, but dared not suggest it to his wife. The greatest sorrow in his life was connected with his own marriage. For Dora was a broken reed where parish matters were concerned.

It pained him, too, to realize how gossip was fanned under his roof between his wife and her ally. A quiet, studious, earnest man, he shrank closer into his shell. Interference did no good. He bore a heavy burden at times.

Now, as they walked across the lawn to the big pear tree beneath which tea was laid, he realized that this new parishioner of his, whom he liked and respected, was learning to trust and in a dim way recognised as a possible help and comfort to him, would be tabooed at the rectory.

He felt annoyed with the Squire. He had had a curious premonition in his first meeting with Deirdre, when they had discussed the former, that the pair were bound to become friends. He himself had wondered about the husband and his non-appearance. Of course it had not missed his wife. He foresaw endless tittle-tattle.

A sudden hope crossed his mind.

"How do you know"—he turned to her—"that Caradoc has *not* been here? He might run down for a night without our being any the wiser."

"I doubt it—in Weavers!" She laughed shrilly.



"Besides, Nurse saw Mrs. Slack at the Mothers' Meeting last Tuesday and she made a point of asking her."

"Well?" The Rector's heart sank. Even his servants were used as spies! He felt a man's sudden disgust for the sex as a whole with their devious ways.

"Oh, you know what Mrs. Slack is! A detestable woman. She said something vague about she 'never chattered in a house where she worked.' The impertinent creature! ("Good for her," the Rector thought.) But of *course*"—she underlined the word—"if he had been there, she'd have mentioned it, if only to get a rise out of nurse. Here comes Charlie, poor boy! Mrs. Byng spoiled our tennis."

The Rector moved forward courteously.

"How are you?" He shook the hand extended to him with a faint repugnance—a sticky hand, with torn nails that offended his own fastidiousness.

"Pretty fit. Just dropped in for a knock-up with *Madame*." He caught the Rector's wandering eye and straightened the red and emerald tie.

"Ran across on my motor-bike. They're spiffing things. You ought to have one. Buzz along in no time, though they rattle up your liver a bit."

"Combining hygiene and pleasure?" The Rector smiled perseveringly. "Well, don't let me stop your playing." He saw the youth's face clear.

"No," said Mrs. Gage quickly. "Come along; we'll finish that sett before tea. It's my serve."

She was off, rolling up her sleeves.

"I found that ball, old girl," the Rector heard the youth say cheerfully, as they crossed the grass and took up their old positions.

His thoughts went back to his own work.

"She'll never remember about that soup. After I've had my tea I think I'll go down to Mrs. Caradoc. I might be able to give her a hint. Mesurier should know better. But oh! for a little charity!" He sighed as he watched the ball fly straight and swift from his wife's racket. "And Chris Pontefract . . . as well! I see endless trouble ahead."

Mrs. Caradoc, unaware of the Rector's troubled sympathy and the speculation she had aroused among the gossips of the village, had passed the morning with her friends working at the new rock garden. Now, with that pleasant laziness which succeeds a fit of energy, she lay back in a deck chair under the cedar's grateful shade, Mesurier stretched on the grass at her feet, watching a flight of swallows dip and circle over the Hall's grey roof.

Hyacinth sat, hugging her knees, a book open on her lap. She was reading aloud in her clear young voice from a little volume of Celtic verse. The air was drowsy with the hum of insect life and from the tree a warm resinous odour rose as the sun pierced through to the dry bark.

"There's a Rosie Show in Derry,  
An' a Rosie Show in Down;  
An' 'tis like there's wan I'm thinkin'  
'Ill be held in Randalstown.  
But if I had the choosin'  
Av a Rosie prize the day,  
'Twould be a pink wee rosie  
Like he plucked whin rakin' hay.  
Yon pink wee rosie in my hair—  
He fixt it troth—an' kissed it there!  
White gulls wor wheelin' roun' the sky,  
Down by—Down by."

The girl paused and Mesurier uttered a sleepy "That's pretty," and shifted slightly in order to get a better view of Deirdre's face.

"Ay, there's rosies sure in Derry,  
An' there's famous wans in Down;  
Och there's rosies all a hawkin'  
Through the heart of London town!  
But if I had the liftin'  
Or"—

"Rollo!" . . . She broke off dismayed. "It can't be. . . . Yes, it is! It's Aunt Byng."

"Oh, my Lord!" He raised himself with a groan. Through the open French window, held stiffly back by the butler, a vast form billowed, descended the steps

and advanced like a frigate with all sails set across the turf in their direction.

The breeze caught her dust cloak and filled it grotesquely.

"Do I dream," Mesurier murmured, "or is she twins?" *Now*, we're in for it! There's no escape—except up the tree."

"Get up!" said Hyacinth. "Don't let her say we weren't polite. She'd simply love it! Go and meet her."

But the Squire was in a willful mood.

"Mark how she moves—there goes a daisy, flat as a pancake! Where's Olga? Don't let her step on that by chance!"

Hyacinth resigned herself. Slipping the book under her arm she moved forward to greet the intruder.

"Why, Aunt Louisa, this is a surprise!" She lifted her face for the dreaded "peck." "Yes—we're all here—under the tree."

"So Chivers told me." Mrs. Byng swept on, vast and impressive.

With an effort Rollo rose to his feet.

"Welcome to Arcady!" His mischievous eyes ran over her. "Will you lie on the grass with me, Louisa, or take this chair?"

"One minute!" Hyacinth pounced on a tiny object and with great care replaced it on a branch above her head. "A caterpillar," she explained. "You might have hurt it." Rollo chuckled.

"Do you know Mrs. Caradoc?"

Mrs. Byng's face stiffened.

"No." She held out her hand, large but well-shaped, tightly encased in a worn dog-skin glove. "But I've *heard* of you," she added suavely.

She settled herself heavily on the chair beside Deirdre, who was choking down inward mirth.

For with the action she recalled a chance phrase of Hyacinth's:

"She sits down like a poached egg—and one feels so sorry for the toast!"

"Ralph drove me over," the member's wife went on, "*in the runabout*. He's taking it round to the stables.

There's a loose nut, I understand, and he thought your man could put it right."

"Ralph? How jolly!" cried Hyacinth. "When did he come? Is he staying long?"

"Only three days," her aunt replied. Then turning to Mrs. Caradoc:

"And how do you like Weavers?" she began her catechism. "I hear you've taken Four Corners."

"Yes. I think it's a dear little place—so restful." Deirdre's voice was cool and composed. She felt instinctively an aggressive note in the inquiry.

Mrs. Byng had the knack by a mere inflection of making her audience aware of a certain condescension and Deirdre did not intend to be patronised.

"You don't find it dull—after town?"

"No; I'm very fond of the country. I was brought up in it as a child."

"Indeed. In what part of England?"

Deirdre smiled. "In the north."

Mrs. Byng sniffed at this. She realised an intended check, but a faint sense of triumph followed.

Deirdre easily read her thought: "If she really were *anybody*, she'd mention her county at once."

Mesurier had flung himself down on the smooth old lawn again. He was watching the pair under narrowed lids. About him was the subtle suggestion of some lithe and sinewy wooded creature, waiting, half-hidden, to spring on a foe.

"Perhaps you hunt?" Mrs. Byng continued.

"No." In a rather absent voice Deirdre ran on: "Nor shoot, nor fish, nor golf." She stopped as Hyacinth rushed in to defend her.

"But she swims splendidly, Aunt Louisa. She beat Rollo yesterday! Of course he gave her a short start, but they raced right across the lake to where the swan has its nest."

Mesurier's face went suddenly blank.

"It's a fact," he said very gravely. "You mayn't believe it, but if you like to come round one of these mornings we'll give you an exhibition, Louisa."

"I can't understand it," Hyacinth added. "Rollo's

legs are much longer than hers. And that makes a lot of difference. He gets such a reach, too, with his arms."

"But perhaps I'm lighter," suggested Deirdre. A dimple came and went in her cheek. She mastered a strong desire to laugh. "That may tell in fresh water."

Mrs. Byng, she decided, looked like an elephant carved in stone. Mesurier, thoughtfully, was nibbling the tip of a blade of grass.

Luckily at this juncture there came a "Hullo!" across the lawn and the swift approach of a youthful figure.

Hyacinth waved.

"Here's the sailor boy!"

Deirdre gave a little start. The brown face with the laughing eyes, blue as her own, was familiar.

Suddenly a memory flashed up into her brain—a crowded "At Home" at the Hyde Park Hotel in the far-off heat and dust of London.

Before she had time to collect her thoughts Mrs. Byng's son had joined the group.

"Well, Bluebell, how are you? And Uncle Rollo—going strong—and . . . well, I'm blest!" He stared at Deirdre. "*You* here! How awfully jolly!" Her hand was being waved up and down. His simple pleasure was good to see. "Who'd have thought it?" He turned to his mother. "I say, Mater—you never told me—Thursby's sister! You remember Jack? He stayed with us one year, shooting. Lord—what a happy family!"

Mesurier with shaking shoulders buried his face in the grass. For his sister's face was a picture to see, politeness struggling with disapproval; but she felt her son's eyes upon her.

"Really? I didn't know myself. Then you were"—she turned to Deirdre—"a Miss Thursby of Barnardsdale?"

"In the North," the Squire murmured.

Hyacinth gazed from one to the other, puzzling it out.

"But you never told me you knew Ralph"—her voice was reproachful—"and I've talked about him lots of times."

"I didn't realise it before," Deirdre explained quickly. "I always imagined the name was Byng." She caught

as she spoke a warning look on the young man's face, grown curiously grave. Suddenly the significance of the whole scene swept across her.

This was the girl—the "Hyacinth" of his confidences—the girl he loved! No wonder the name had been familiar on their first meeting in the storm.

But Mrs. Byng was talking again.

"Dear me, how small the world is." She changed the subject rather abruptly. "I hope, Rollo, we're not too late for tea. The drive has made me thirsty." Her voice was certainly very dry. "Or is it too much to expect of Arcady?"

Rollo signalled to Hyacinth.

"Run in and hurry up Chivers. We'll have it here under the cedar."

Trollope made a movement to follow. Then with a glance at Deirdre he checked himself.

"Do you want to hear the latest news about your brother?" He laid a hand upon her chair.

"Please."

He went on hurriedly:

"I've got a good yarn about him for you. Not sure it's fit for the mater's ears!" He laughed as he spoke. "If you'll come for a turn on the lower terrace—or are you too lazy?"

"I'll come." She rose from her seat. Her mind was still following up a thread from the past.

What had he said, about a rival . . . a "married man?" Again the old dread revived as they strolled across the velvety turf.

She had never forgotten the glimpse she had caught of clandestine romance that night in the wood. Again and again it returned to her mind with the unanswered question: who was the girl?

At length she persuaded herself—a little convinced despite her repugnance by a gossiping story of Mrs. Gage's, in which Chris had figured as Don Juan—that it must have been some sordid affair with one of the servants at the Hall.

She had met Pontefract often since then and had studied him in Hyacinth's presence. But nothing increased

her suspicion. They laughed, they chaffed, they quarrelled together, made it up and started afresh. Chris was old enough to remember Hyacinth as a tiny child. He declared he had rocked her in her cradle!—but this was a flight of fancy. He stood exactly halfway in age between her and her father and it made him a friend of both and one of the few intimate neighbours whom Mesurier affected.

Mrs. Pontefract never came to the Hall save on a formal errand and Deirdre had a shrewd suspicion that Chris found the place a refuge from his wife's jealous monopoly.

Trollope was studying her expression as they sauntered along side by side.

"I rather wanted to talk to you. That was a trumped-up story about your brother. I knew you'd guess. You don't mind?"

"Of course not." She hesitated; then decided to be frank.

"I've only just realised that Hyacinth is . . . *the* lady! I don't wonder you thought her sweet. I'm quite in love with her myself."

"Are you?" He flashed her a smile. "So you haven't forgotten our conversation?"

"No. I would like to wish you luck."

"That's nice of you, but I'm afraid I don't stand an earthly chance. A cousin is too much like a brother! As a matter of fact, she used those words when I hinted at it in the Autumn."

"But girls often change their minds." Deirdre looked so sympathetic that the boy suddenly stopped and faced her as they reached the secluded lower terrace.

"Not Hyacinth!" he said. "She's like her father in that respect. How long have you known her?"

In a few words she explained their meeting and subsequent friendship.

"It's very odd—like a fairy-tale!" Trollope said, when she had finished. "My running across you in town, never dreaming you'd get to know her, and then your coming down here. Of course, if I'd guessed——" He broke off, confused.

She helped him out courageously:

"You wouldn't have mentioned her Christian name," and added slowly, "or other matters?"

"No, of course not!" He fidgeted. "Fact is, I can't remember quite what I said. It worries me."

"About"—she decided to brave things out—"a rival—some . . . married man."

With a quick gesture he caught her up.

"That's it. I've kicked myself ever since for speaking of it. Because, you see, I'm quite certain it was a mistake—*my* mistake. I'm a perfect ass over Hyacinth—jealous of every man she meets! He was just a pal, like all the rest. She never told me anything, but I got it into my silly head that this chap was the cause. Since then I've learned better. She looks on all men as brothers. It's a part of her . . . holy innocence."

Deirdre smiled back relieved. She was touched, too, by the way that this boy had lowered his voice on the last words.

"I agree with you. She's still a child—a *dear* child. I'm very thankful. You see her father trusts her to me a good deal. He's wrapped up in her. I'd hate to have any suspicions—you know what I mean?—and keep them from him. But one must be *sure* in a case like this. I'm so glad you've spoken out."

He looked at her searchingly.

"*I'm* sure. Will you believe me? Besides—if it's any comfort to you—the man I referred to has gone away."

He saw her last doubt vanish.

Her face cleared and she nodded her head.

"Then the field's clear for you?" she suggested, faint mischief in her eyes.

"With three days' leave?" His voice was rueful. "I say—shall we go back?" His transparent eagerness amused her.

"Yes. You mustn't miss a minute!" She laughed and Trollope joined in.

"You are a *brick*—aren't you?" They turned and retraced their steps together. "I'm awfully glad you're her friend. How do you like Uncle Rollo? He's a rum chap, most people think. But one of the best when you



know him. I *was* surprised to see you here! He's not exactly a lady's man!"

"I don't wonder." The words slipped out.

Trollope nodded.

"Rough luck! My mother's always worrying him to marry again, for the sake of the place. But a burnt child dreads the fire. I suppose that's how he feels about it."

They came into sight of the little group under the cedar where the servants were arranging the tea things. Mesurier still lay on the grass, leaving his guests' entertainment lazily to his daughter. He resented this sudden invasion and the curiosity he divined in Mrs. Byng's attitude towards Deirdre. He was not in one of his happiest moods.

"Ah, there you are!" Hyacinth cried. "We began to think that you'd eloped."

"Not this time." The sailor laughed. "Though we've been through many adventures together! Haven't we, Mrs. Caradoc?"

His mother gave them a sharp glance.

"D'you remember that awful party in town? And the old Sphinx?" he ran on. "You saved my life that time and I shan't forget it. Nor anything else."

The last three words were *sotto voce*. They breathed honest gratitude and Deirdre gave him a friendly nod, in which there lurked a secret shared.

They were neither of them well skilled in disguising the thought of the moment. It seemed to the irate Mrs. Byng that "men *liked* Mrs. Caradoc."

"A dangerous woman," she said to herself. "I'm inclined to agree with the Rector's wife."

Deirdre's eyes fell on the Squire. He was watching her, too, an odd look, half-cynical, on his face. It startled her for an instant, and to her annoyance she felt the colour rising under her clear skin.

"He surely doesn't think I'm flirting?"—the thought touched her sensitive pride—"With a boy like that!" She felt aggrieved.

Mesurier still stared at her. She looked back deliberately—a short, sharp battle of wills.

Then before those brilliant eyes, with their mocking sadness and masculine strength, her own fell, with a sense of defeat.

For the moment she almost hated him!

## CHAPTER XIII

A SUNDAY calm lay over Weavers. It was the hour of digestion, moral and physical, which follows church and a mid-day dinner and partakes, not a little, of stupefaction.

Deirdre stood at the garden door, looking longingly at the orchard, a green patch that suggested shade, and debating whether she should go and change into an old frock or risk her new one in the hammock.

It was of muslin, lightly sprigged with a quaint pattern of cornflowers and her church-going hat of burnt straw was wreathed round with the same blossom. She caught a glimpse of herself in the glass, as she hesitated, feeling the spell of the warm lazy afternoon.

"A pity to crush it," she said aloud, conscious of the cool effect of the crisp flounces; then she yawned, stretching her arms over her head. "After all, I've only myself to please now, and if I like why shouldn't I wear it? I've paid for it." The logic seemed extremely sound.

The sunflowers watched her as she passed, wide-eyed, and a brier-bush laid a tentative finger on her skirt, jealous of her glowing face, not unlike a rose itself.

She paused to disentangle the branch and stooped to inhale the delicate scent of a tea-rose, warm in the sun, that leaned up against its neighbour.

"You've hardly room to breathe, my dear. We shall have to move you in the Autumn. Won't it be a busy time!" She began to plan drowsily a hundred and one alterations.

"I must ask the Squire about sweet peas." She lifted the latch of the little gate and passed on across the grass to where between two apple trees a hammock was slung with a yellow cushion that looked like a giant buttercup.

"It's much too high." She stood beside it. "I wish there had been a lower branch. I shall have to call in 'Mr. Iggs' and effect some sort of compromise."

A kitchen chair was placed against the trunk of the tree and mounting on it she gathered her starched skirts about her and a moment later was happily engulfed in the coarse net, her hat suspended from a twig, her head deep in the soft cushion.

"Isn't this nice?" She stared up at the cool leafy boughs above, through which she could catch a peep of the sky, hazy with heat and softly blue.

She could see beyond the yew hedge a thin, straight column of smoke rise from Mrs. Slack's cottage and a corner of the thatched roof; but no sound marred the silence save the droning hum of a bumble-bee and the faint noise of a goat cropping the coarse grass of the orchard.

He was tethered by a frayed cord to a stake and moved in a circle like a living compass, busily eating out geometrical problems. He rejoiced in the name of Nebuchadnezzar, was horned and ancient and rather inclined at the slightest provocation to butt; not a very endearing companion, and heartily disliked by Day.

She had met him one dark, mysterious night, wandering loose in the garden, having eaten through his worn rope, and the *rencontre* still rankled.

Deirdre, recalling this and Day's conviction that the devil had appeared in person on this occasion, smiled as she watched the stumpy tail jerk with each effort as the goat tore at a patch of wiry grass which constituted his Sunday dinner.

She felt too lazy to read the book lying unopened on her lap. Her hands were clasped under her head and beneath the frills of the stiff skirt, unknown to her, was a generous display of slim ankles in silken hose that ended in pretty suède shoes.

This was her tribute to the Sabbath. On week-days she revelled in clothes that placed comfort before smartness; but even then she had that knack of putting them on daintily, which adds value to well-worn garments.

Her thoughts turned to her neighbour in church. Her pew was behind the Pontefracts' and to-day during a tedious sermon by a stranger in aid of some foreign mis-

sion, she had caught herself studying the profile of "Mrs. Chris."

She sat there alone, very stiff, in a "best frock" of Tussore silk—suggesting money but no taste—and the dull, neutral-tinted stuff seemed to accentuate the thick and sallow skin of the wearer and her general effect of colourlessness. Against the background of a pillar stained by Time, her aquiline nose and somewhat receding forehead and chin were silhouetted without mercy.

Deirdre disliked the face, which reminded her somewhat of a ferret. Mrs. Chris had furtive eyes of light grey with heavy lids fringed with scanty mouse-coloured lashes. Her mouth was bitter, with thin lips, and deep lines at the corners: a mean mouth which nevertheless hid a superb row of teeth. Yet, where in a better-favoured woman these would have brought distinctive beauty, in Mrs. Pontefract they seemed to add a note of cruelty.

You felt she could bite—and bite hard! That Justice might move her but never Mercy.

Like many people with ample means she fluctuated between an effort to make an outward show with her money and her natural cheese-paring instincts.

Yet when it came to the offertory she placed a gold coin on the plate handed to her by Mesurier, who, in correct Sunday garb, looked like a schoolboy doing penance.

Deirdre was always amused in watching his progress down the aisle. She knew it was one of his concessions to tradition, but that he hated it.

The Squire's son, when possible, had always performed this function. In Mesurier's case, with no child but Hyacinth, he had continued the custom after the old man's death.

His face, preternaturally solemn, when he emerged from his box-like pew, plate in hand, was the signal for a general fumbling in pocket and glove and a fluttering among the village beauties, hats straightened, demure eyes brightening at his approach.

For the Squire was very popular despite the legend

that hung round him of misogynistic tendencies. These were less marked with the country people. He would chaff the old women on their doorsteps and listen patiently to complaints—an excellent and generous landlord who saw his villagers well housed. A sure sign of his influence was the fact that the youth of the village were eager to serve at the Hall in any domestic capacity. Mrs. Slack, in her early days, had been the second kitchenmaid and even that bleak embittered body had a good word for the Squire.

Deirdre's mind had swept on to this distant point from her drowsy dislike of Mrs. Chris.

Mesurier was a new type to her, and the odd way in which he combined his love of freedom and hatred of pomp with an inborn reverence for tradition. But she realized that his dislike for society in his own class was based on the shams surrounding it and this made him more akin with the simpler, less educated folk who were not afraid to face facts.

She sank lower in the hammock and a ruffled lock of dark hair strayed against the yellow cushion.

Her eyes closed sleepily.

Already on the borderland of dreams she caught the warning sound of steps approaching steadily down the distant cinder path.

"It's only Day," she said to herself, too lazy to turn her head.

She had forgotten that the maid was not on duty that afternoon, the house in the charge of Mrs. Slack, and when the gate creaked on its hinge, hidden from view by the tree behind her, she lay half-lost in dreams until a shadow fell on the grass.

Then with a little gasp she stirred—too late! It was Caradoc.

"Mark!" She tried to struggle up.

"Don't move." He stood before her, smiling rather nervously. "You look so comfortable there."

Her cheeks flushed with sudden anger and the quick beating of her heart.

To be caught like this, unprepared, with no possible way of retreat. Words failed her. She simply stared

at the handsome and debonair face, so familiar and yet so strange, like the echo of some past life.

"It's nice and cool down here," he went on carelessly, but his eyes were shrewdly surveying her and the pretty dainty picture she made in her muslin frock with her ruffled hair against the green leafy background. "In town the heat is terrible; you're lucky to be out of it!"

He sat down on the kitchen chair uninvited and bared his head.

Deirdre's thoughts were moving fast. It was impossible to descend with dignity from her lofty perch. She was fairly caught—and Mark knew it!

A faint smile curved his lips as he explained that Mrs. Slack had volunteered to announce him. "But I told her I'd find the way myself. A nice little place." He looked around him. "It's an old house, isn't it?"

By this time Deirdre had resolved on her course of action. She would leave all initiative to him. She knew how he shrank from direct speech and the mere fact of his visit left her mistress of the position. He had come down uninvited. It was for him to explain his errand.

But how had he found out her address?

She answered his question coolly.

"Yes. The corner half of it used to be the Turnpike Lodge. The cottages were added on, later, by another tenant."

"He's made a good job of it. I see he's used the old tiles and matched up the bricks carefully." He smoothed back his red-gold hair. Then, as though he dreaded a pause, he added in a leisurely tone:

"Your Cousin Maddie bought the place?"

Deirdre started. Who could have told him? He seemed to know everything.

"Yes." Her lips closed tightly.

Caradoc's eyes, restlessly, wandered back to the hammock and lingered a moment on her ankles.

"I thought I'd just run down and see how you were getting on," he said. "Your mother seemed a bit anxious and I'm off next week for my holiday."

"Mother?" The mystery was solved. "When did you see her?" She steadied her voice.

For this was the bitterest blow of all: that her betrayal should lie there.

"She dined with me on her way through town to Gretchenbad and stayed the night. I must say she was very kind. I was rather worried just then trying to find a new servant. She put me on to a registry and gave me a few hints."

"Then where's Perkins?" Deirdre's mind moved back to the old life. She was talking, too, to gain time. Her own mother—of all people!

"Well," said Caradoc rather slowly, "it's an odd thing. She ran away. I had to speak to her one morning and when I came back she was gone—boxes and all. The porter helped her. I gave him a good piece of my mind."

"I expect you did." Her voice was dry. "And Cook?" Caradoc fidgeted. For the first time Deirdre began to feel a faint amusement. She could picture the scene perfectly.

"At any rate," she said to herself, "he's not finding things too easy."

"Oh, she's settling down again, though her cooking goes from bad to worse. But your mother says it's difficult to find any cooks at all! So I thought it wiser to raise her wages. She said it was dull in a flat, and I've let her have a few friends so long as it's not when *I'm* there." He was trying to carry it off brightly. "So now she says she'll stay 'to oblige'!"

Deirdre smiled.

"I see. And the new maid's a success?"

"Well, not altogether. Noisy and breaks things. But I'm off next week, and meanwhile I'm out of the flat a good deal. It doesn't seem to make much difference." His longing for sympathy upset his original plan and he blurted out: "The bills are awful! And when I complain cook gets on her high stilts and swears I order expensive things. All bosh! There's waste somewhere. And that rogue of a porter steals the coal. I shall have to have it out with him!"

"I expect you will," said Deirdre sweetly. "You ought to engage a housekeeper."



Caradoc glanced obliquely at her. She looked so cool and composed that his nerves failed him at this crisis. He remembered his mother-in-law's warning:

"My child will be led—but never driven."

What increased his nervousness was the new charm he divined in Deirdre. She looked so young, so patently happy in her country life—in a subtle way "settled" there—that he saw he must move warily.

He had pictured quite a different welcome. A scene possibly and tears, to end in a reconciliation. He did not realise that the years of lonely resourcefulness in herself, due to his neglect of her, had prepared his wife unconsciously for the present separation. He had never strengthened the links of passion and duty by companionship. Save for the strong bond of habit they were further apart than in their courtship. And now the habit was broken through—the bird had escaped from her cage.

He drew his chair a little nearer. Deirdre looked half-asleep. He felt an odd confused desire to shake his wife and to kiss her.

"I'm off to Le Touquet next Thursday, with Roscoe and two other men, for a month's golf and some bathing." He spoke rather jerkily. "I dined last night with the Hardwicks. They're going, too, and Freddy Wyatt. Mrs. Hardwick asked after you. She suggested, in fact, that you should join us later on. D'you care to come?"

"But I don't play golf." Her voice was careless.

"Oh, well, you n-needn't, you know." He stammered a trifle. "There're other things. Hardwick's no golfer, either. And you like the sea."

For the first time she saw a wistful look on his face.

"Hardwick"—she yawned—"bores me to tears! And, as to his wife, we've nothing in common. Besides which you forget the expense."

"That's nothing," said Caradoc quickly. "I hope you'll come. We should—all—like it."

"But I'm quite happy here," she objected. "I love Four Corners. I've no desire to leave it—even for a week—or the joys of London society."

To herself she was saying: "Does he think I shall

follow him when he raises a finger? Advised to 'make it up' by Mamma, with her pious dread of a scandal! It's a fortnight since she went abroad. Mark has not hurried to find me out. He's uncomfortable, that's all. He misses the careful housekeeper."

She changed the subject deliberately.

"I forgot to ask you, have you lunched?"

"Yes, thanks. I got some at Kilby. I had to change and wait for a train."

The tired look had returned to his face. He seemed older, Deirdre thought; but she stifled the faint suspicion of pity.

"London life," she decided hardly. There were dark shadows under his eyes that testified to late hours.

His glance met hers.

"I must say the country seems to agree with you." He was starting on a fresh tack. "I've never seen you looking better."

"I feel fit. I live out of doors—a quiet life, but very peaceful. As you know, I never cared for town. Unless one has the means to dress and go out in comfort, it's not much pleasure for a woman. Here I can do as I like—old clothes are the fashion!—and money is not the only 'hall-mark.' There's less show and more comfort. Besides which"—she laughed lightly—"I enjoy being lord of my domain. I'm growing a thoroughly selfish person and in danger of becoming a tyrant!"

"And you're never dull?" he insinuated.

"No. I've made some pleasant friends and I'm quite accustomed to being alone." (Under her lashes she saw him wince.) "At present I'm learning gardening——" She broke off with a little frown. For a clear call rang over the hedge.

"Mrs. Caradoc, are you there?" It was Hyacinth's voice.

The gate clicked and two dogs dashed forward, followed swiftly by the girl, Mesurier and Olga in her wake.

"Salt! Pepper! Come to heel! Ah, *would* you?" She cracked her whip. The West Highlander slunk back guiltily, and his iron-grey pal came leaping through

the long grass with his black nose and beady eyes wickedly alive for mischief.

Deirdre, rather vexed at this unforeseen *contretemps*, called out:

"I'm in the hammock—under the tree. I can't get down!"

"Coming!" Hyacinth laughed gaily.

Caradoc rose to his feet, as the Mesuriers drew near, watching the pair curiously.

The Squire had returned to his shabbiest suit, his Sunday duties at an end. Yet he carried it off with the easy grace of utter self-forgetfulness.

"Looks well-bred," thought Caradoc. "And the girl . . . what a little beauty!"

For Hyacinth, in a much-washed linen frock of her favourite blue, her hat swinging from her hand, with the wonderful wealth of her pale gold hair, looked like the princess in disguise of one of Grimm's fairy-tales.

Deirdre introduced her husband.

Hyacinth, refusing the chair he offered, settled herself on the grass.

"We're taking the dogs for a walk. They always expect it on the Sabbath. We wondered if you'd care to come, but, of course, *now*"—she glanced up at the tall stranger with a smile—"it's quite hopeless," she added, laughing.

Mesurier silently stooped and picked up the fallen book which lay wide open under the hammock.

"I'm afraid so," Caradoc nodded. "I've taken her prisoner, you see. She can't get down out of her net without help. It's far too risky! And she's too proud to ask for it."

As his double meaning flashed across her, Deirdre fidgeted.

The Squire looked up, mischievous.

"Can't you?" He held out his hands invitingly with a merry gesture.

"Not with a due regard to convention," she laughed back. "Though I'll tell you a secret. When I really want to escape I shall find a way—for myself!"

"The kitchen chair!" Hyacinth prompted. She had

missed the significance of the speech. "I'll save you." She sprang up and ordered the men imperiously: "Go and talk to Nebuchadnezzar—he's a nice goat—at a distance!" She smiled up at Caradoc. "I shouldn't be *too* friendly. He has what old Mrs. Grady calls 'a way wid him' when he's out of temper."

"You mean that I might find myself on the horns of a dilemma?"

"He doesn't like to be called names! Now, off you go—both of you."

Mesurier laughed.

"You'd better submit. She always gets her own way." And they strolled off, side by side, an odd contrast, the well-dressed man, so obviously a Londoner, with his pale face and red-gold hair, and the Squire, in his worn tweed suit with his gipsy-like colouring. Caradoc began to talk of a match at Lord's the day before.

"You're keen on cricket?" Mesurier asked.

"I used to be, but I've given it up. Too stiff. I've taken to golf—it's the only game when one's tied to town."

Mesurier was wondering what his age could be. It was somewhat difficult to guess.

"I'm afraid you'll find no links near here—though there are some on the other side of Kilby."

"Oh, I'm not staying," said Caradoc quickly. "I'm off to Le Touquet next week. So I ran down first, for a few hours, to see how my wife was getting on."

Mesurier nodded his head. His dark face was inscrutable, but all his senses were on the alert. He had noticed the possessive note in Caradoc's voice when he spoke of Deirdre.

"Beginning to miss her," he thought to himself. "He hasn't troubled her much, so far."

For, although Deirdre in their talks had never mentioned her husband's name, this new friend of theirs had guessed there was secret trouble between the pair.

He had been somewhat taken aback by this sudden unexpected meeting. Caradoc was a handsome man with a pleasant manner, but the Squire, with the intuition so largely acquired in his wanderings in many lands, where

he had met such diverse types and studied them in his thoughtful fashion, was not wholly impressed by him. He divined a cold temperament and an irritable, captious temper.

"Could be a brute if he liked," he thought, as they paused in front of Nebuchadnezzar.

The goat stared back at them aggressively and Caradoc laughed.

"I don't call it a pretty pet. It's rather like the orthodox caricature of a Yankee. Well, Brother Jonathan?"

He advanced towards it, his hand extended.

"Look out!" said the Squire. The goat charged, head down. Caradoc doubled back.

There came a laugh from the apple trees. Hyacinth and Deirdre, arm in arm, appeared in the sunshine.

The two men turned back to meet them.

"You live near here?" said Caradoc.

"Yes," the Squire answered briefly, "just over those woods there." He made a rather vague gesture.

"It's pretty country," the other resumed. He was wondering who this new and shabby friend of his wife might be and the pretty girl who called him "Rollo." He had not gathered the relationship. The introduction had been careless and he did not even know their names.

As they joined the other pair he was struck once more by the change in Deirdre. The matrimonial habit had dulled his perceptions in the past. He now realized afresh how pretty she was and it stirred in the man a renewed feeling of resentment. How *dared* she run away from him?

Mesurier was chaffing her:

"Behold the descent from Olympus! And how does Minerva like Earth?"

"She likes it extremely—for a change. The air is less rarefied. I expect the High Gods felt the same."

"When they came down to woo mortals?" Mesurier smiled puckishly. "I believe you! They were jolly glad to exchange the monotony of nectar for an honest pint of home-brewed ale."

Caradoc felt rather bored. This was the sort of talk

he hated. He turned aside to admire Olga as a bait to draw Hyacinth.

Mesurier, left with Deirdre, went on in a lower voice: "We're off now. If I'd known, we shouldn't have broken in on you."

"Don't go," she said swiftly; "not just yet. Stay for tea." There was unconscious appeal on her face, but Mesurier shook his head.

"The dogs want their exercise. We were going to walk into the vale and hunt up Chris. But he's away, and I can't face the lady alone. She turns me sour for a week." He was strolling forward as he talked. "They're off to Dieppe very soon. They go there every year. Chris is looking about for rooms—or so he says." His eyes twinkled. "Having a spell of liberty before the plunge back again into public domesticity! Poor old Chris—he deserves it."

Deirdre glanced up at him and saw the Squire's face turn grave.

"I can't quite understand that marriage." She hesitated. "I suppose it was money?"

"Not altogether. A base trick, and a piece of quixotic folly. Don't go and misjudge Chris. He's been a fool but not a knave—a *dear* fool." He opened the gate and, followed by the other pair, they walked down the cinder path, turned to the right by the well and reached the entrance to the lane.

"Well, good-bye." He held out his hand. For a minute he looked down into her eyes.

"Bluer than ever!" he said lightly. "And I always believed that Minerva's were grey. It's shaken my faith in your wisdom."

"Perhaps it's the effect of Earth?"

"Never!" He seemed about to add something further, then checked himself. "Come along, Hyacinth." He whistled the dogs to his heels, and ran a hand through his daughter's arm, as she turned once more to call back:

"You'll come and bathe, at eight, to-morrow?"

"Rather!" Deirdre cried.

She watched them stride down the road and vanish from sight round the corner.

"That's an uncommonly pretty girl." Caradoc broke the heavy silence. "What's the name?"

"Mesurier." Deirdre still leant on the gate.

"And the man's a brother—or a husband?"

"Neither. He's Hyacinth's father."

"But she calls him Rollo!" Caradoc stared. "Besides, he looks far too young."

"He's thirty-seven," said Deirdre. Somehow she did not wish to discuss these dear friends with her husband. But to avoid further questioning she went on rather quickly: "He's the Squire. They live at the Hall—a very beautiful old place."

"Really? I've heard of it. 'Weavers Hall.' Yes, of course! Where do you bathe—in a river?"

"No, there's a lake." She turned away down the path toward the house. "I'll tell Mrs. Slack to get some tea."

"Not for me," said Caradoc quickly. He pulled out his watch. "I haven't time."

Instinctively she guessed his thoughts. He would not eat or drink in this house where his wife lived at her own expense.

She liked him for this touch of pride and yielding to a gentler impulse:

"Would you like to see over the place?" she asked.

"Very much." He followed her in.

"You've got some nice bits of blue." He stood before the shelf of china.

"Those were a non-birthday present from Hyacinth Mesurier." Suddenly she remembered her last real birthday spent in London. . . .

"They're good," said Caradoc. "That blurred bowl looks like Crescent Worcester."

"It is." She led the way upstairs. "This is the room I use the most. I call it my Lookout Tower."

Caradoc glanced round him. Inwardly he was surprised. He recognized the artistic touch which in town his wife had been forced to subject to merely useful considerations, hampered by economy.

He admired the view from the narrow windows and crossed to the deep-set grate with its high "dogs" and *steel fender*.

"It's all in keeping——" He stopped abruptly. On the chimney-piece lay a pipe.

"You haven't taken to this, I hope?" He spoke with a jocular intention which did not deceive Deirdre.

"Only cigarettes," she smiled. "That belongs, I think, to the Squire. He left it here the other evening."

"He wouldn't miss it, I should say. Looks pretty foul! He's an odd chap. Does he always dress like a tramp?" Faint temper was in his voice.

Deirdre ignored the remark.

At the bend in the stairs they met Day, clad in her best hat and coat. She drew back with a little gasp and vanished into her own room. Caradoc's face hardened. Again he had recourse to his watch.

"I shall miss the only decent train if I stay to see the rest of the house."

He turned and went back to the hall.

But there he lingered, picking up a slim leather-bound volume that lay on the gate-legged table. He turned the first page idly. His eyes fell on a faded plate with a coat-of-arms. He guessed the owner.

Another trace of Mesurier! For the first time in many years jealousy seized the man. He had been so *sure* of his wife; a background figure, but always there.

Yet his pride forbade any comment. He was conscious at heart that his mission had failed, but he still thought the whole affair a "woman's whim." He believed that the rebel would tire of it in due course.

Meanwhile he had placed their relations on a less obscure and formal footing. He saw shrewdly that it was wiser to overlook the escapade than to run the risk of a refusal if he "ordered" her to return. In his heart he anathematized "Cousin Maddie" for providing the means to accomplish the purpose.

For beneath his impotence and mistrust lay a longing he struggled in vain to ignore; more potent since he had seen the pretty and familiar face.

He wanted her back, at any price, though he would not admit it to himself. Absence had added a sense of value—no little assisted by the discomfort he was ex-



periencing in the flat! Now, as he gathered up his stick and gloves, he forced a smile.

"Well, my dear, I'm glad to see your holiday seems to be suiting you. It's a nice little place—for *the summer*. If you change your mind about Le Touquet write to the Hermitage Hotel. I'll come and meet you at Boulogne if you let me know by which boat."

To his surprise Deirdre laughed. "But that would break into your golf!" Her voice was friendly yet mischievous. "Besides, I don't change my mind."

She held the door open for him, her hands engaged with the latch.

"Good-bye. If you write to Mamma, tell her how happy and well you found me. It will save her further anxiety."

A group of villagers strolling by in their Sunday clothes stared at the pair.

Caradoc felt his position absurd. He would not risk a rebuff before this interested audience.

He stepped down into the dust.

"Good-bye." Abruptly he raised his hat and was off without another word.

Deirdre, still smiling, closed the door. Then her face changed.

She stood for a moment one hand pressed hard on the back of a chair, feeling relief surge over her followed by a wave of anger.

"He offers me a week at Le Touquet, to make up for years of neglect! As if I couldn't see through it! He misses the comfort of his home. And as for Mamma—" angry tears rose to her eyes and she stamped her foot—"It's the last word in treachery. Well, I've done with both of them! I can picture her"—her thoughts whirled on—"simply charmed to find herself the centre of a family quarrel. She would call herself 'the peacemaker'! Her love of meddling amounts to a crime! And to stay there, in my absence, just to save herself the cost of putting up at an hotel. I know her. She's mean to the core! That's the truth of her intervention. She doesn't know what my income is, and, besides a scandal, which *she abhors*, she's afraid I shall break loose from Mark

and find myself stranded in the end and that she will have to come forward."

She turned quickly. A quiet step came down the stairs. It was Day, her outdoor clothes discarded, trim in her little muslin apron.

"I'll be getting your tea in a minute, mum."

She passed swiftly across the hall and vanished into the kitchen beyond.

Deirdre's tense face softened. Hurriedly she wiped her eyes.

"Day," she called, "you ought to be out."

There came a sound of cups rattling, then the faithful, motherly voice:

"I've been out, thank you, mum. And it's *that* hot I'm better in. So I told Mrs. Slack she could go." She reappeared in the doorway, and glanced shrewdly at her mistress.

"A cup o' tea will do you good"—and was off muttering—"Them men!"

## CHAPTER XIV

ALL through the long hot afternoon they had been busy bridge-building and now the last stone was laid and they stood erect to admire their work.

"You must cross first," said the Squire. "Remember, you hold your life in your hand!"

Deirdre laughed, tired but happy. Her serge skirt was smeared with earth, and over her brown glowing face the loosened masses of her hair fell forward, shading her eyes. Impatiently she tossed back a curling lock that obscured her sight.

"It's fine— isn't it?" she said.

Hyacinth, a few paces away, was busy filling the little pockets in a group of boulders with gritty soil, which, later on, would hold rock plants.

She called back over her shoulder:

"Wait a minute! We'll christen it first. From the grunts and groans I've heard from you two it ought to be named the 'Bridge of Sighs.' You're what old Mrs. Lomax calls 'oneasy breathers' when you work."

She sat back on her heels and glanced up the winding path, already laid with irregular paving, that led from the bridge up the further slope to where a bent figure laboured, preparing the ground for a straggling flight of stone steps in uneven slabs.

"Just look at Second-Best. He's pointing like a good retriever."

For the gardener's head was thrown back. He seemed to be sniffing the sultry air, his face turned towards the wind.

Deirdre watched him, amused.

This taciturn but skilful worker had always interested her. Sparing of words, with a grudging air, he would plod on with the task set him until his opinion clashed with the Squire's. Then, immovable as a rock, he would argue out the knotty point with a slow, hardly-veiled

disdain for what he called "amatoor gardening." The only person who could move him was Hyacinth. He worshipped her. His eyes, brown and intelligent, would follow her movements with dog-like fidelity. Her gardening tools he cleaned himself and at times, when the ground was damp, he would appear with a kneeling mat and stand, glowering down at her silently, until she used it.

Now, as they watched him, he rose to his feet and thrust his arms into the coat which he gathered from off the end of a barrow.

Still bent, he moved towards them with a slow and heavy step—a thick-set and shaggy man, who reminded Deirdre of a bear.

He touched his cap to Mesurier.

"Rain comin'," and, adding "sir" as an afterthought, he lurched past with an indistinct word tacked on which Deirdre could not catch.

Mesurier nodded. "Tell Jackson I shall want the car round at half-past six."

"Yes, sir." Second-Best quickened his pace. He had the odd shambling gait of a quadruped balanced on its hind legs.

"Does he always use wireless?"

"Generally." The Squire smiled. "He's stingy in speech but not in work. He thinks there's a storm coming up and he's nervous about his frames. Perry's away for a holiday and he places no faith in his father."

Deirdre glanced at the sky above her.

"It *can't* rain." For the blue heavens, hazy with heat, seemed miles away, laced with fleecy drifting clouds of snowy white and the sun poured down with the strong purpose of September.

"I wouldn't mind betting that it will. Second-Best has a most uncanny weather-sense. I asked him once how it worked and he answered tersely, 'I smells rain.' I think it's true."

Hyacinth had joined the pair. "Of course it is. *He* knows. Besides, you've only to watch that aspen and the way the leaves are turning up. I'll give it another ten minutes."

The bridge was christened by Deirdre with a handful of water scooped from the brook. Then in turn they tested it and Mesurier, in wild spirits, danced a fandango in the middle.

"Sound as a rock!" He began to sing,

"Sur le Pont d'Avignon  
On y danse à la ronde. . . ."

and stopped abruptly. A heavy drop of rain had splashed upon his forehead.

"Here it comes! Let's make for the wood." He tucked an arm through Deirdre's and linked up Hyacinth with the other.

"Run!"

They were off down the slope. The Squire's long legs covered the ground, setting a truly terrific pace. He dragged his companions forward mercilessly, though Deirdre gasped out in protest:

"Stop—oh, stop! I *can't* go on!"

Over their heads a dark cloud had stolen up swiftly and now the rain descended in earnest, lashing down, with glints of sunshine still athwart it, straight and true like an emptied sheaf of arrows with fine shining points.

"*There!*" Mesurier pulled up. They had reached the belt of sheltering trees.

Deirdre was fighting for breath, but Hyacinth only laughed at her. Olga, like a shadow, slipped into the undergrowth, dreading thunder, her tail clipped between her legs, head drooping despondently.

"Now," said Mesurier, "I think we've all earned a little rest." He moved on a few steps. "Here's an arm-chair for the lady."

A beech tree with its silvery trunk capped a rise in the ground; its roots had emerged from the soil and between them was a narrow space, deep and soft, where last year's leaves had crumbled into finest dust.

Deirdre, thankfully, settled herself in this cosy nook, her arms propped on the bare roots, her back against the smooth bark. Then she turned on Mesurier, half-laughing, half-resentful.

"You wretch! You nearly killed me."

"I say, I'm awfully sorry." He flung himself down at her feet, his chin propped on his hands, his eyes still mischievous. "I couldn't help it. It's the rain. It always goes to my head like this after a long spell of drought."

They could hear the drops pattering down on the leaves above, but the fine old tree sheltered them like the roof of a house.

"It wanted to catch us," said Hyacinth, squatting on the ground beside him, her arms clasped round her knees. "It's simply furious that we escaped! Listen to it. Can't you hear what it says? 'I'll have you next time! Have you pat! You pit-i-ful mor-tal—pat—pat—pat!'"

"Anyhow it's cooled the air." Deirdre watched Mesurier split a dried beechnut across with his lean brown fingers.

"The kernel? *Not* at home! Those squirrels never give one a chance. They always nobble all the full ones. I love beech trees," he rambled on, "they're aristocrats, though a shade effete, with their heads so high up in the air and their hold on the soil sublimely careless. They don't burrow down like the oaks—the sturdy yeomen of the wood. They're just a trifle unbalanced, but they're beautiful—so cleanly cut."

He rolled over on his back and gazed up at the high branches.

"Cedars are hard to beat. But there's something a little Jewish about them—hook-nosed and patriarchal—the influence of Lebanon. The tree I like least of all is the sycamore. It's truly plebeian, with sticky hands." He made a face.

"And the willow?" Deirdre asked.

"A gentleman—plays cricket. But I rather mistrust his poor relation, the widow who weeps. She's out for money. And she doesn't care how draggled she gets; her skirts are always thick with mud. I fancy she drinks—on the sly."

"But don't you like the silver birch?"

"Yes; not so much as the beech. I think he's a

shade pedantic—the schoolmaster among the trees. *He* birches and gets silvered in return for his attentions. It's not fair that he should have the pleasure and the profit, too! But the beech"—he yawned blissfully—"above all the copper beech!—Like a lovely Venetian woman, with slim smooth neck and Titian hair."

Deirdre drowsily agreed, but Hyacinth was inclined to argue.

"The oak's my friend. After all he was the choice of the dryads."

"Because they were soulless," said Mesurier. "They could only realise outward strength." He picked up a dry twig and looked at it thoughtfully. "I wish. . ."

Hyacinth shook her head.

"Too lazy. It's no good, Rollo." Then she laughed. "Ask Deirdre."

Mesurier, twisting sideways, gave her a hesitating glance.

"What does he want?" Deirdre smiled.

The dark head, with its thick, straight hair, was near her knee, and suddenly she felt an odd longing to run her fingers lightly across it.

"I'm sure it would give off sparks if I did!" she conjectured drowsily. "It looks so full of vitality."

She started as Mesurier said:

"I wish you would." Had he read her thoughts?

But Hyacinth enlightened her, mischief in her green-blue eyes.

"I'll show you, if you like. We call it 'Merlin's Spell'; and the real beauty of it is it generally sends him fast asleep! He loves it—simply to distraction!"

She took the twig from Rollo's hand and, leaning across, began to stroke his head with it, from the square brow across the well-shaped crown. Mesurier gave a little shiver.

"Delicious!" He closed his eyes.

"Isn't it funny?" said Hyacinth. "I used to do it as a child, and once, after a bad illness when he couldn't sleep, every night I found I could send him off with it. Now you try." She passed the twig to Deirdre. "But,

first of all, make a back for him with your knees—so—are you both comfy?”

A sleepy voice came up from the Squire. “You don’t mind?” Deirdre laughed.

Mesurier, emboldened by this, leaned back luxuriously.

“If I fall asleep,” he explained, “it will be from sheer happiness. You’ll take it as a compliment, won’t you?” He chuckled softly. She could feel the broad shoulders quiver.

Hyacinth corrected him.

“You might at least be decently grateful.”

“I am—literally—at her feet.”

The absurdity of the situation suddenly dawned on Deirdre. “If only Mamma could see me now!” she thought. “I’m sure she’d die of shock. This is just the kind of thing she’d call ‘most improper,’ with the usual misuse of the word.”

“That’s right,” said Hyacinth; “you’ve got the idea. Not too lightly! I believe there is a spell, somehow. Perhaps the twig sends messages down to the brain? Or it may be a simple case of hypnotism.”

She rose to her feet and moved away, calling Olga, who crept forth from under a bush, panting a little, her red tongue hanging out.

“Thirsty?” She stroked the dog’s head. “Shall we go to the lake and have a drink?” The Borzoi stiffened to attention, her beautiful eyes on her mistress’ face.

“I’m coming back,” called Hyacinth. “Don’t tire Deirdre out,” and was off with her long easy stride, her ghost-like companion at her heels.

The rain still beat upon the leaves and from the earth a fragrance rose, the subtle incense of the woods; birds twittered and everywhere was a pleasant sense of slackening—a relief from the strain of the storm’s approach.

Deirdre felt it, too. Mesurier, half-asleep, slipped lower, his head turned, a cheek pressed against her knee.

She could see now the straight, clean line that ran from his chin to his ear and the face in profile, palely brown against the dark serge of her skirt.

The narrow-lidded eyes were closed, fringed by thick



and glossy lashes, blue-black like his hair, and the well-marked prominent brows.

Not a single thread of grey! She wondered a little, knowing his age.

"It's the life he leads," she decided, "always out in the open air. But he'll never be old"—the thought followed—"not *really* old, like other people."

Then she saw he was asleep. She leaned back, her hands in her lap, feeling the peace of the warm silence sink down upon her spirit.

Somewhere far above her head a wood-pigeon was cooing faintly: "Coo-rroo . . . coo-rroo . . ." with a soft monotonous note.

She looked down again at the man. Mesurier was breathing evenly, his limbs stretched out, muscles relaxed, plainly lost in the land of dreams.

The mystery of sleep stirred afresh her imagination. Where had he gone—the essence of him—leaving behind the helpless body?

She felt a sudden tenderness flood her heart. He was dear to her, very dear, with his strength and beauty and his curious simplicity.

Beauty? Why had she used that word? It was too feminine for Mesurier. Yet "handsome" didn't suit him, either, with its trim note of modernity.

For a moment vaguely she pictured him in his true setting, away in the past, a leopard-skin slung from one broad shoulder, a wreath of vine leaves in his hair. . . .

How black it was!

Her fingers stole across it almost unconsciously. It seemed to tingle under her touch, every thread steeped with life.

Mesurier stirred. Still half-asleep, he reached up with a blind movement and captured her hand, drawing it down before she had mastered her surprise. The next moment she felt his lips pressing deeply into her palm. He kissed her fingers with rising passion, then the smooth and delicate wrist.

"Darling! I was dreaming of you." His voice in a whisper reached her ears. "I dreamt—" He broke off abruptly.

For Deirdre, in a sudden panic, as realisation poured in on her, had torn her fingers out of his with a low cry,

"No! no! . . ."

The next moment, fully awake, Mesurier had struggled up. He stood looking down at her; at her flushed face and shamed eyes, his brows set in a frowning line.

Then with a shrug of his shoulders he wheeled round and strode off. But he did not leave her altogether. He halted, his back still turned, head thrust forward, hands clasped behind.

As she recovered her presence of mind she could see the knuckles standing out, white, above the locked fingers and guessed the conflict within the man. And at the sight her resentment faded. Indeed, it was mostly against herself. She remembered the impulse that had moved her to smooth that dark head of his; and she knew deep down in her soul that for one hesitating moment she had yielded to the call of love.

After a minute or two he turned and came slowly back to her.

"Will you forgive me?" he asked simply. "I'm awfully sorry." His voice was sombre.

She nodded, finding nothing to say, painfully nervous under his gaze.

Aware of this, with an effort he went on, more lightly:

"Perhaps it was partly 'Merlin's Spell'? I'm only mortal man, you know. There are limits to one's resistance—against—" he wavered—"unknown magic."

And then on Deirdre's troubled heart suddenly enlightenment poured. Only sincerity could heal this breach between them worthily.

"Don't!" he saw the colour rise in a great wave under her skin—"it was just as much—my fault—as yours." The effort brought the tears to her eyes.

An odd sound broke from his lips; half admiration, half remorse. He bent down and gripped her shoulders.

"You *brave* thing!" His voice rang.

A wonderful light was in his face, his eyes reached

her very soul. She was swung up to dizzy heights for one perilous, breathless moment, shorn of her personality, her spirit merged in another's.

Then his hands slipped away; he stepped back.

"I never thought that I should respect a woman so much!" He smiled at her but his face was pale. "I'm forgiven, then?" After a pause he went on, still watching her. "And there's no cloud on our friendship? It's all over—a secret between us and the beech tree. We can trust him—he's a gentleman—he understands." His mouth curved whimsically. "I expect he's jolly ashamed of me—an old tenant and can't leave. In fact, I think he has freehold rights. Ah!" . . . She was holding out her hand.

"Then if we shake, like true Britons, he'll feel relieved," she suggested. She gave Mesurier a shy smile. There was no need for further speech.

"What's become of Hyacinth?" he asked when this rite was performed. Deirdre rose to her feet, dusting off the stray leaves.

"She took Olga to the lake to have some water, whilst you were snoring."

"Never! I mean, do I snore?" Boyishly he asked the question, his face so anxious that she laughed.

"Ask the beech tree." They moved on through the wood after the truant.

"It's stopped raining!" He glanced up as they came to a little open space. "But work's over for to-day—we'll go home and have some tea. I've hunted out a book for you, on old Provence. You were asking me about Mistral and the *Félibres*—d'you remember? This goes back to earlier days, with legends of the *Troubadours*. It's a mighty volume, so I thought it was wiser to order the car."

"I'm getting spoilt," said Deirdre.

"But think how you've worked," he protested. "It's good to think the bridge is finished. There she is—my long-lost daughter!"

By the edge of the lake Hyacinth, her shoes and stockings on the grass, was dabbling her feet in the cool *water tranquilly*, lost in day-dreams.

"D'you call that giving the dog a drink?" Rollo's voice made her start.

"Yes—no." She looked up. "Had a nice sleep?" Her eyes twinkled.

For a moment an embarrassing thought flashed through Deirdre's mind. Had the girl left them together on purpose? She thrust it aside determinedly.

Mesurier pulled his daughter's ear.

"Come along—we want some tea. We've been waiting for you to return."

He went on with Deirdre, leaving Hyacinth to follow.

At the edge of the wood was open park, still dotted by fine old trees, with stretches of bracken, high and green, but spangled with the gold of Autumn.

As they trod the springy turf a herd of deer, startled, rose from the shelter of a group of oaks and skimmed across the intruders' path.

The sun shone down on their dappled skins, shy heads and slender limbs and Deirdre drew a deep breath of delight.

"Aren't they beautiful?" she cried.

She watched them plunge into the sea of bracken and vanish as the fronds curled back over them.

"Do you believe in reincarnation?"

"Sometimes." His voice was lazy. "What made you think of that just now?"

"I was thinking that if I had the choice of a new bodily shape hereafter, I shouldn't mind being a deer."

Mesurier's happy laugh rang out.

"Why not have a change?" he asked.



## CHAPTER XV

THAT night Deirdre dreamed of the Squire.

She was swimming in a rough sea, blue as a sapphire, but flecked with white and by her side a dark head rose and fell as they capped the waves.

No land lay in sight, only the violet rim where the sea met the radiant Southern sky, yet Deirdre was not afraid. She knew she was safe. She had only to call to the strong swimmer whose laughing eyes turned to her in the moments of calm between the long rolling breakers. She knew he would not let her drown; her faith in him was absolute.

And then, with one of those swift transitions peculiar to dreams, the scene had changed. She lay on a white and sunny deck; above her a great sail flapped with the breeze that sang through the taut ropes.

She could feel it blowing in her hair and taste the salt upon her lips; she could stretch out a hand and touch the helmsman whose brown face, keen as a hawk, was silhouetted against blue skies, and a little laugh broke from her, born of the sheer delight of life. . . .

And with the laugh she awoke—to find that through the open window the air was streaming into the room, cold with the first sweet nip of Autumn.

It swung the curtains to and fro with the snapping noise of wet linen; for another storm had passed over Weavers and the rain had invaded the narrow casement.

For a moment she lay drowsily trying to recover her dream, then with a faint sigh of regret she came to full consciousness.

Between the parted folds of the hangings she could see a ray of pale moonlight and she slipped out of bed and made her way to the window to tie back the blind. But first she gazed out at the night. The face of the harvest moon was veiled by drifting clouds, yet hedge

and tree stood out like some dark wood-cut and the road glistened with the rain.

The deep silence of the country hung over all but far away it was broken by the sound of hoofs that gradually grew louder.

She gathered up the rain-dashed curtains and secured them with a rueful smile as she thought of Day, who would certainly scold her for letting in what she called "night damp."

Then she felt for the clock that stood on the dressing-table and turned the dial towards the light.

Close on two! What an odd hour for a man to be riding through the village. Perhaps he was going for the doctor?

She could not decide to return to bed until she had seen the traveller pass, and, drawing her dressing-gown around her, she waited, full of curiosity.

At last as she strained her eyes down the lane, a dark form emerged from the shadows. She could hear now the sucking sound of hoofs sinking in soft mud.

A heavy cloud blotted out the moon. She could only see the vague outline of a man, head bent, facing the wind, his cap jammed down over his eyes, astride a big and powerful horse as the pair passed beneath the window. But as the rider turned up the hill a touch of white near the ground caught her attention—a white sock!

She was sure now. It was the centaur.

She leaned out breathlessly and watched the bay break into a canter as they reached the steep incline; then the night swallowed them up.

"Well!" She drew in her head, amazed. "Then that proves it. It can't be Chris. But I'm certain it's the same horse. What a mystery it is! For who can be riding it? And why?"

She went back, slowly, to bed, the question still puzzling her.

"Supposing it is what I thought—some intrigue with one of the maids at the Hall. A groom, perhaps? He couldn't see her at this hour. Not unless she slips out

when the others are sleeping? And it seems so unnecessary! She would have to go through that dark wood alone and risk the chance of being caught. Especially as the Squire and his daughter are still camping out in the glade.

"I give it up!" She snuggled down under the bed-clothes with a sigh. "Anyhow, I'm glad I waited. It shows how one can be mistaken."

She felt repentant. Her suspicions had influenced her attitude towards Pontefract, whom she liked but had been inclined to mistrust.

Her thoughts turned to Dieppe and that strangely incongruous pair in that garish setting. She pictured, amused, the lady's ferrety, colourless face darting an ominous jealous glance at every pretty foreigner who dared to lay eyes on Chris. Visions rose up before her of a bony back tightly encased in Tussock silk, discreetly turned on the laughing crowd of bathers, and of the husband evading his duties at the first excuse to lose himself in more congenial surroundings.

"I should like to see her at the Casino. I daresay she's shocked—and *enjoys* it! I've met plenty of people like that. The spectacle of moral weakness enhances their own sense of virtue!

"I wonder why he married her——?" The squire's words rose to her mind. "He was caught—she laid some trap for him. . . ." Her speculations dissolved slowly into the clouds of dreamless sleep.

When she awoke it was broad daylight. Day was standing by her bed with her morning tea and two letters. The top one bore her mother's writing.

"That will keep," thought Deirdre. "I think I'll have my breakfast first. It's sure to be disagreeable."

For after Caradoc's departure she had sat down and written with cool decision, suggesting that her married life was her own affair and not her parent's.

The other envelope, she saw, bore a foreign postmark. She opened it quickly.

Day was examining the curtains.

"The rain's been in, mum, in the night. You might have caught your death of cold—the floor's that wet."

Her voice was stern. "And I closed the windows last thing!"

"But I opened them," laughed Deirdre. "Stuffy sleep means a stuffy brain. Now, Day, don't scold me. I've just had some lovely news." She skimmed the letter eagerly. "Mrs. Robert Thursby's coming—and she wants me to put her up. Why! It's this week-end! *How nice!*"

Day became practical.

"Then I'd best get these curtains washed, and turn out the spare room. If Mrs. Grady came to-morrow she could finish the new valances. I hope, mum, you've remembered we're getting rather low with coal? And about wine, mum? I don't know what Mrs. Thursby is used to drink—but there's only——"

"Oh! *do* be quiet!" Deirdre childishly screwed the envelope into a ball and threw it at the little figure, neat and dapper, duster in hand, polishing the damp boards.

"Listen! She says: 'I'm bringing you a little Paul Poiret gown and the cunningest hat you ever saw. It will make the village sit up. I haven't forgotten Day, either!' There, now!—aren't you excited? Oh, it *will* be lovely to have her here!"

"Yes, mum. If all's ready."

The maid had the last word. But in the doorway she glanced back, her grey eyes wide and tender.

"It'll do you good, mum, a bit o' company," and went noiselessly downstairs to impress on Mrs. Slack the need for wholesale cleaning—to start at once!

She foresaw, undaunted, an orgy of work; of polishing and silver-rubbing till the place shone like a new pin. For her love was of the deeper sort, expressed in deeds and not in words.

When Deirdre came down she found upon the breakfast table a basket in which peaches and grapes peered forth from fresh vine leaves.

"From the Hall, mum," Day beamed. "They came just a minute since, with a note from Miss Hyacinth. The grapes would keep, mum, if hung up." Her mind still ran on preparations.



Her mistress smiled. "You can take them." She tore open the little letter.

"DEIRDRE, DEAR," it began in a large square handwriting with original twists to the capitals. "One has to place the adjective last, or it reads as if one were stammering! We're going over to Kilby for lunch—will you come? We'll call on the chance in the car at eleven o'clock, as we want to do some shopping first. Don't fail us!

"The fruit is from Rollo except the single nectarine, which grew on *my* wall. It was quite cold swimming this morning. I think you were wise not to turn up. But I missed you.

"Yours,  
"H."

What a dear child it was! Deirdre laid the message down and over her breakfast began to plan details of the coming visit.

"I'm going into Kilby this morning," she announced to Day when she came to clear. "I'll see to the coal and order some wine. Just make out a little list of anything else that we shall want."

"In the Squire's car, mum?" Day brightened. "I'd best get out your thick coat. It's 'parky.' And what about lunch, mum?"

"I shall get it in Kilby." Deirdre smiled. "You'll have the place all to yourself." For she read the thought in the other's mind.

"Thank you, mum," said Day simply.

Indeed, to use her maid's favourite word, it *was* "parky," as they tore up hill and down dale a few hours later towards Kilby.

Deirdre drew up the fur rug that covered her knees and Hyacinth's as they sat behind the Squire, who drove, indifferent to weather, disdaining the overcoat beside him.

Hyacinth was rather silent. Once Deirdre glanced at her, surprised at the long gap in their talk.

The girl looked tired. There were faint shadows

under the beautiful blue-green eyes; an air of languor gave to her slim and drooping shoulders a delicate charm.

"Are you cold, dear?" Mrs. Caradoc asked.

With a little start Hyacinth seemed to awaken from her dreams.

"Not a bit—I'm lazy this morning. I couldn't sleep."

They passed the quarry and came to the river and the brown fence which enclosed that large and ugly country mansion which advertised the late brewer's wealth.

Old Saunders had planted it down very near to the main road with a brick and terra cotta lodge introduced as an afterthought.

A plantation of Scotch firs was growing up as a screen between the massive building and the fence, but the upper windows were visible with all the blinds drawn down and the place looked as dead as its late owner.

"The Pontefracts are still away, apparently," said Deirdre.

"Yes—at Dieppe." Hyacinth nodded. "Have you ever been there? A horrible place; like an English barmaid in French clothes."

Deirdre laughed at the description.

"I'm afraid I rather liked it," she said. "Not the Casino and hotel part, but the old town and the harbour."

"It wouldn't be bad without the people," the girl admitted. "It *means* well, but the trail of the tourist lies over all—the worst class too, the *parvenu* one. I shouldn't mind it in the winter. I expect it really lives then; a sleepy but a natural life without straining after effect."

They were approaching the outskirts of Kilby, with brickyards and little rows of jerry-built houses. An acrid smell reached them from the gasometres.

Mesurier slackened speed as they came to the commencement of the trams, and they dodged in and out of market-carts, drays and heavy loads of coal, with now and again a smart turn-out whose owner would wave to the Squire.

The road narrowed suddenly at the opening into the market place, where once an old gate had stood, between arcaded rows of shops and on their right was a battered cross with worn steps surrounding it—a picturesque and peaceful note.

It was market day and the wide paved square was covered with long lines of stalls heaped with vegetables and fruit, poultry and dairy produce.

A little crowd stood around an auctioneer perched on a barrel in the midst of a sale of furniture; and beyond him the ground was white and blue with coarse china of all descriptions, whilst here and there the sunshine played with the bright surface of kitchen tin ware.

A varied scene, full of colour and life, hoarse voices and endless movement; from the stout women in white aprons busily trading in eggs and butter to the slow figure of a farmer walking round a new plough.

"How Morland would have loved it!—with that heavy cloud and the light beneath!" Deirdre was drinking it in. "That girl might have stepped out from one of his pictures—with the live duck under her arm!"

Hyacinth nodded.

"You should see it in Fair time. We always go—it's such fun! And one year we brought Aunt Byng. Ralph was home and he *made* her come. We went round all the side shows, but she struck at last at the Fat Woman—I suppose she felt sympathetic." Hyacinth giggled, recalling it. "The last show finished her—and no wonder! It was called by a most alluring name: just 'Umbratic Mysteries.' There was nothing to show what it meant. A sad-looking man walked up and down outside beating a drum in a green plush suit and yellow stockings. Ralph simply dragged us in. We sat down in the front row with Aunt Byng placed between us. It was very dark and horribly stuffy, but packed with people all sucking oranges. Then the curtain drew up to shew a bare white screen and a big shadow was thrown upon it—that of a very fat man. First he took off his coat, and his waistcoat, and undid his braces. Aunt Byng—I could feel—was beginning to shake like a jelly. Virtuous indignation,

you know! And when he started to pull off his shirt Ralph had simply to hold her down. I felt a tiny bit nervous myself, but, lo, and behold!—like a snake, he wriggled out of everything and stood up—in a bran new suit! Then he bowed, kissed his hands to the ladies and the whole performance began again, with new thrills of excitement. The audience simply *loved* it! They roared with laughter! But at the third complete costume Rollo thought it time to go. I shall never forget Aunt Byng's face when we found ourselves in the open air. Ralph and I were weak with laughter. She wanted Rollo to write to the mayor."

"Rather a Gallic touch for Kilby," Deirdre laughed heartily. "I suppose they thought that being in shadow it was only the *ghost* of impropriety."

"I've always wondered," said Hyacinth, "what happened at the finale. Ralph wanted to go back but Aunt Byng wouldn't hear of it, so we went on the Roundabouts instead. You've only got to say now 'Umbratic Mysteries' at Gorseton to see Aunt Byng at her best!"

They pulled up before the County Bank and Rollo got down.

"I'll cash that cheque and then if you want to go shopping I'll take the car to the White Horse."

He went inside whilst Hyacinth dragged off her heavy coat and helped Deirdre out of hers.

"We'll leave these. They'll be all right. Look—there's Mrs. Gage. In a purple sport coat. Such a fright!"

The rector's wife was trotting along, a tennis racket under her arm, beside her friend the spotty youth, her freckled face wreathed in smiles.

"Let's get out before she sees us." She suited the action to the words and they crossed the narrow pavement quickly and gazed into a shop window.

Mesurier emerged from the bank and was caught.

Hyacinth pinched Deirdre's arm. "Poor Rollo! Isn't she priceless?"

They could hear Mrs. Gage babbling on behind them and see her face in the glass.

"He's shaken her off." Hyacinth turned. "Here we are—when you're disengaged!"

The Squire scowled.

"There's your money—don't spend it all. Or drop it. I'll order lunch for one o'clock—will that do?" He looked at Deirdre.

"You wouldn't like to come shopping too?" Mischief shone in her blue eyes.

"I'm afraid I can't. I have to go and see my lawyers." Then he laughed. "Don't get lost—I'm not sure you're both to be trusted on your own!"

As they stood beside the car he leaned out from the driving-seat, a mischievous smile twisting his lips. "I'm going to have my hair cut. It's rather long, don't you think?"

His dark eyes with keen delight saw the colour rise in Deirdre's face. Hyacinth whistled softly.

"Did it interfere with Merlin's Spell?"

Deirdre could have shaken her.

"A little," said the Squire gently. "Nothing to hurt." He was moving off when suddenly his face changed. Another motor was drawing up, evidently to intercept him.

Hyacinth clutched Deirdre.

"Quick!" She dragged her down the pavement. "Aunt Byng——" she whispered the name. "Rollo's in for it again."

"Serves him right!" said Mrs. Caradoc.

After a busy morning's work it was nice to rest in the low-roofed room of the old inn reserved for them and eat the inevitable cold beef and apple tart sacred to England.

"I don't think we'll try the coffee again," said Hyacinth rather sadly. "It's only courting disillusion."

"But cherry-brandy," suggested the Squire. "They can't put grounds into that." He lit Deirdre's cigarette and then his own so carelessly that the match at its last gasp burnt his fingers.

"*Sapristi!*" He flung it into the grate.

"That's what comes of playing with fire." Hyacinth's

face was so innocent that Deirdre again dismissed a faint feeling of suspicion.

"It's an odd thing when our tea's so good," Hyacinth went back to the subject, "that we can't make coffee in this country. Now in France almost anywhere, in the smallest café, it's worth drinking. That reminds me"—she opened her bag and drew out an envelope—"Chris sent me some photographs—they're rather funny—of Dieppe. He calls this one"—she handed across a snapshot—"The Antipon Family.' Look at fat mamma and papa with their fat offspring in the sea. All in a circle, holding on to each other's hands for dear life in about a foot and a half of water. Aren't they touching?"

She leaned on the table and placed her hand over her father's.

"Why don't you wear a striped bathing-gown, and develop a figure, and look like a top?"

"You don't feed me well enough," the Squire grumbled.

His daughter ran on, still pointing to the photo:

"Isn't mamma's bathing-cap sweet, with its donkey's ears? And so useless! She'd never dream of ducking her head or of venturing into deeper water. I suppose it's to ward off sunstroke. But this is the gem!" She passed across another picture to the pair. "On the back is written, 'Her first cocktail.' Of course, it's really a lemon-squash. She's a hardened teetotaler."

Against the background of the Casino, on the extreme edge of her chair, very stiff and absorbed, Mrs. Pontefract had been caught, a glass in her hand, solemnly sucking away at the straws.

She looked as remote from the scene as a missionary at a cock-fight. Beyond her a gay French group were crowded round a marble table chattering and gesticulating, a waiter hovered in the background and a tiny child, dressed like a doll, with a big balloon was being captured by a stout "nourrice" beribboned gaily, her tartan cloak swung out by the breeze.

"I like her expression," said the Squire. "A shepherd playing on his pipes? Arcadian isn't the word for

it. A shepherd in a boat-shaped hat. Any more?" He held out his hand.

For a second the girl hesitated; then she gave up the rest.

"There's one of Chris which a friend took—and a couple of views—nothing funny."

"It's rather nice of the old chap. He's a good-looking man," the Squire commented; "and this?"

"It's a little place called Puy. Mrs. Pontefract had a cold, so he took a day off and explored the country. It looks pretty, doesn't it?"

"Yes." He passed it to Deirdre. She saw a carefully taken view of a narrow bay between high cliffs with a pebbly beach and bathing machines and the end of a building perched above it.

"What's that?—an hotel?"

"Yes. He lunched there. The 'Château de Puy.' There's a wooded valley that runs inland, with a few villas—so he says. He's lost his heart to one of them—a wee place with a pretty name tucked away among the trees. It's called 'Villa Nicolette.' There's a snapshot of it somewhere."

"This one?" Deirdre found it.

"Yes, with the low verandah."

The Squire seemed to be lost in thought. Suddenly he made them start.

"I've got it! Listen, now." In his deep voice he began to recite, giving each word its full value.

"Dox est li cans, liax est li dis,  
Et cortois et bien assis,  
Nus hom n'est si esbahis,  
Tant dolans ni entrepris,  
De grant mal amaladis,  
Se il l'oit, ne soit garis  
Et de joie resbaudis,  
Tant par est douce."

"But I don't understand," said Deirdre. "Only a word here and there. It's not French?"

"It's Provençal," Mesurier smiled at her. "The legend, 'Aucassin and Nicolette.' Shall I translate? Roughly, I mean?"

"Please."

He did so, line by line, hesitating over his task.

"Gentle is the song, sweet is the note  
And courteous and cunningly blent,  
No man there is so distraught,  
So sad and so overtaken,  
With a great malady ill,  
That if he hear it could not be cured  
And his joy built up again,  
So greatly it is sweet."

Hyacinth echoed the last sentence.

"Tant par est douce." I like that."

"Thank you so much," said Deirdre. "I begin to remember the story now. A slave girl and the son of a king. It's mentioned in that book you lent me. I read half of it last night."

Mesurier nodded. "I think it is. The Félibres are doing a great work—saving the life of a beautiful language."

He stared out of the dusty window, obviously lost to the world around him.

Hyacinth gently touched his arm.

"Come back, Rollo."

He started, then smiled.

"Sorry." He gathered the photos together and handed them over to the owner.

"I shall have to run up to town next week—about the house in Deanery Street. Would you like to come?"

She shook her head.

"When do you go?"

"I'm not sure." He turned to his other guest. "Did you say it was this week-end you were expecting your godmother?"

For Deirdre had told them the news earlier in the day.

"Yes." She guessed his intention. "Don't go just as she comes. I do want you both to meet. I hoped I might bring her to the Hall."

Mesurier laughed.

"You seem to forget I'm no good at society!" He looked at her teasingly. "I think I'll settle to start on Friday."



Deirdre shrugged her shoulders lightly but Hyacinth guessed she was disappointed.

"He won't go. I'll promise you. That stupid old house can wait."

"As a matter of fact, it can't," said the Squire. "I've been talking to Hughes this morning about it. Still—perhaps a day or two. I can't resist the temptation, now that I come to think of it," he glanced up at Deirdre, "of seeing the lady brave enough to 'renounce the devil and all his works'—in *your* name." His eyes twinkled.

"She's brave enough for anything." Deirdre's face grew suddenly tender. "And the truest friend I've ever had."

"That's a nasty one," said the Squire.

His daughter nodded. "*We* don't count."

"Now that rivalry's introduced," Mesurier went on, "no power on earth shall drive me to town. The house can fall down—it probably will!"

He explained the matter more soberly.

"It belonged to my mother; she left it to me. It's Hyacinth's when she wants it. A nice little '*pied à terre*' for her when she wishes to 'mix in London society.' That's a pet phrase of Louisa's! And rather true! It is a mixture when either of us join the procession. I've had a good tenant for several years but he's just left and I've been told the place wants a thorough doing up—both the house and the furniture." He turned to his daughter. "You'd better come. You can choose the papers, Hyacinth. I'll give you *carte blanche*. Won't that tempt you?"

For a moment the girl hesitated. Then she faced him honestly.

"I'd rather stay here."

Mesurier laughed. He did not seem to regret her verdict. Deirdre, quietly watching the pair, guessed it had been a careful feeler on the Squire's part and that he was pleased to find that ~~the~~ girl preferred Weavers.

"Well, I'll bring you home a present. What shall it be?"

Hyacinth brightened.

"Frocks—jewels—or chocolates? Aren't those what women like?" He appealed to Deirdre. "Furs for the winter?" He ticked off the items on his long fingers, one by one.

"What I really *want*," said Hyacinth simply, "is a nice new collar for Olga."

## CHAPTER XVI

"So you don't regret coming here?" Cousin Maddie smiled as she spoke, leaning back in the deep armchair, a dainty picture in the twilight. Her silvery hair was piled high above her pale and piquante face with its arched eyebrows and clever eyes, and she wore a wonderful mauve rest-gown wrapped around her diminutive form.

"Regret it!" Deirdre laughed softly. "I don't know *when* I've been so happy. I'm a different creature altogether."

"You look it." Mrs. Thursby nodded. "It takes a burden off my mind. I was rather afraid you'd find it dull, after the first week or two. Weavers is hardly a gay place, but you seem to have made some pleasant friends. Tell me more of the *Rara Avis* who flies from all society, but seems inclined to haunt your nest. About what age is this hermit bird?"

"He's two years older than myself. But he doesn't look it. At least——" she paused. "Well, you'll see him to-morrow, and Hyacinth too. They've asked us up to lunch at the Hall. I'm quite sure you'll admire the girl. I must show you a sketch I made of her." She rose to her feet and hunted for it among some papers on the table.

"Here it is." She passed across a narrow portrait in water colour depicting Hyacinth leaning against the old archway of grey stone, bareheaded, one slim hand laid upon the Borzoi's collar.

It conveyed the youthful charm of the model in her simple frock of faded blue, the slender neck and proud young head with its coronal of heavy plaits.

Mrs. Thursby studied it.

"Is she really as pretty as that?"

"Prettier far—her hair is lovely!—masses of the *palest* gold."

"You say she's half American?"

"Yes." Deirdre hesitated. "But I'd rather you didn't allude to that. There's a tragedy connected with it. I think I had better tell you the story."

She did so, with a few omissions, whilst Mrs. Thursby listened gravely.

"A sad affair," was her comment when Deirdre had quite finished. "It makes me mad, too, to think it was one of my own countrywomen! People in England are only too pleased to consider a girl of that class a type—rather than an unlucky exception." A slight frown was on her face. "I suppose that Mr. Mesurier thinks we are all tarred with the same brush?"

"Heavens, no! He's too broad-minded." Deirdre had overlooked, in her keen sympathy for the Squire, the fact of how it might strike her godmother. She went on rather quickly:

"I know exactly what you mean. It's just the same with me, myself, when I go abroad and find English people ignoring recognised foreign customs. I'm sure sometimes in Italy, when I've seen a chattering horde of tourists invade one of those beautiful churches and treat the place as a sort of show, I've felt too ashamed for words!" She paused, breathless and contrite. "But the Squire has travelled far too widely to label a race by an individual. I doubt, besides, if Eulalie belonged to any recognised class—just people who had made money quickly and were 'doing Europe' as a part of the sudden rise in their fortunes."

"I know the type," Mrs. Thursby sighed. "Utterly brainless and pleasure-seeking, with a third-rate education and an overwhelming desire to shine! The Squire must be a character. I always heard he was eccentric, but there's something very touching to me in the way he wandered off with his child—all alone—it's quite a romance! Haven't you a sketch of him?"

"Not a good one," she hesitated.

"Never mind! I'd like to see it. It will give me some idea of the man."

She watched Deirdre, unwillingly, search for it, her

eyes twinkling with some secret mischievous thought. "Now don't pretend you've torn it up!"

"No—it's here." She came back, holding the drawing in her hand. "I told you of our first meeting—how I took him for the gardener? Well, here he is in his native dress! It's not finished. I did it from memory."

Mrs. Thursby took it from her eagerly; then held it out, her eyes narrowed, at arm's length.

"A regular gipsy! It's clever, though. . . . Unorthodox—that touch of orange. Yes—I like it," she decided.

For Deirdre had drawn the Squire boldly in profile: a chalk outline suggesting the thick and glossy hair and the bare brown throat; but beneath this she had added a daring splash of colour in the bandanna handkerchief, twisted in a loose knot.

It gave to the lean and virile face a subtle value hard to define.

Mrs. Thursby tried to express it.

"He looks—untrammelled, as though he lived in the open air—a gentleman-tramp! I'm always sorry for portrait painters nowadays with modern dress. In last year's Academy, portraits of men who appeared to be all clothes seemed to predominate. One carried away an impression of suits—not faces or characters. Large middle-aged gentlemen with the air of having dined well. (You could almost smell the roast beef!) However the artist may gloss over starched collars and other details, two-thirds of the canvas is covered with clothes and unless the features are arresting one is left with a horrible stuffy feeling of the moral victory of broadcloth!"

Deirdre laughed. "You're quite right, but I think it's the sitters as well as their clothes. Portraits are often the result of affluence. They're luxuries, at any rate, by a well-known artist! And success does not always improve a face—it often adds a smug expression. I doubt if picturesque dress would help? There's nothing, for instance, harder to paint than a man 'in pink,' or in uniform. It robs the skin of its natural colour. If I clothed the Squire entirely in orange he would *probably* look like a Malay!"

"Instead of a farm labourer?" Mrs. Thursby was mischievous. "So this is the *Rara Avis*," she mused. "The hawk tribe—a bird of prey! I'm not sure I quite approve of this new friendship of yours, my dear. He doesn't strike me altogether as a *restful* companion for 'middle-age.' I remember you made a point of that and your grey hairs when last I saw you."

Deirdre fidgeted.

"If you're going to be aggravating——" She took the sketch away from the critic.

Mrs. Thursby laughed gaily.

"I was only admiring your new beau. I sure think he's quite worth while. Do you get me?"

Deirdre laughed outright.

"You're a demoralising person! You lie there in a Paris tea-gown like some dainty old French *Marquise*, full of scandal and anxious to find youthful follies all around you. You ought to be kept under lock and key with other priceless miniatures."

Cousin Maddie, secretly flattered, stroked down the soft folds which had replaced her travelling dress with one tiny manicured hand.

"I'm glad you admire it. I love mauve—this pinky shade. You must wear the gown I've brought you at this lunch to-morrow. I reckon it will complete the conquest."

Then, with one of her quick attacks which Deirdre dreaded, she added lightly:

"And how is Mark? I forgot to ask."

She saw the faint shrinking movement with which the other received the question.

"Oh, all right. Enjoying himself."

Against her will the words were tinged with a slight note of bitterness.

Mrs. Thursby's face went grave.

"He knows you're here?"

"Yes—now."

A short silence fell between them. Then the older woman laid a hand over Deirdre's where she sat on a low stool by her side.

"Tell me, sweetheart." Her voice pleaded.

"There's nothing to tell." The deep blue eyes were fixed on some far distant object. "He came here a few days ago. To see, I suppose, if I still existed! Mamma had given him my address. She knew I wished it kept a secret but she thought—so she writes—that it was her 'duty'! She's been having a perfectly lovely time playing the rôle of peacemaker, and advising Mark to forget and forgive."

Mrs. Thursby winced at this and the quiet scorn in the low voice.

"Well?" She kept the reluctant hand in her loving clasp and gradually, as Deirdre realized the true and tender sympathy in her face, her own hard-won reserve broke down—a reserve of years in which she had tried loyally to screen Mark's failings.

For the first time she laid bare the dreary background of her life: how the daily pursuit of economy by which she had tried to please her husband had ended in her isolation from the pleasures that other women enjoyed, both social and intellectual: how her own money had all gone in the household needs and to avert the scenes which so outraged her pride, leaving her shabby and ever at work.

"I make most of my own clothes. But you can't sit and sew all day and then emerge a butterfly—you're too tired to enjoy life. You can't be smart on a small income unless you steal it from useful things. So of course Mark thought me dowdy and he didn't care to take me out. I don't mind being poor. It's *not* that." Her eyes filled. "I don't wish for gaiety or to shine in society. But one must have *something* to fall back on—understanding, companionship. But whatever I do without it's the same. Mark grumbles all the time. And, of course, it doesn't affect him. He's good-looking and popular. He has his club, his golf, his bridge—his men friends and his speculations. It never occurs to him to think that the price alone of a box of golf balls or the money he wins or loses at cards would take me to a theatre and give me a break in my daily round. He looks on me as a mild resource when all his outside interests flag and he grudges me

the money it costs to keep up our tiny flat. I'm not a comrade—I'm just a *wife*! That is, an unpaid servant! He makes me feel like a child of the poor whom he keeps out of charity. I don't really wonder that women, placed as I am, do rash things. And I don't believe it's so often passion as the desperate need for sympathy—to feel that one is really *wanted*, for one's self alone, by a human being!"

"My poor dear!" Mrs. Thursby had guessed at much that was hidden, but not at these depths. Wisely she let the burdened heart overflow without further comment as Deirdre took up her story again.

"A child might have made all the difference, but Mark never cared for one. Something to live for—protect and love—a respite in one's loneliness. Still"—she pulled herself in hand—"it wouldn't have done, I know that. Poor little soul!—a cramped life, grudged for every penny spent. No—it was better to bear it alone." She paused, her face still wistful. "But that's over—I'm out of prison! I've tried my best and it's been a failure. I shall never go back on the old terms. It's not as if he *needed* me—he wasn't meant for a married man. He's perfectly happy by himself!"

"I'm not so sure," said Cousin Maddie. She stroked the cold little hand in hers, choking down her indignation and giving her shrewd brain free play. "Mark is a true Englishman, with a morbid fear of showing emotion. He's taken you too much for granted." Her fine brows were drawn together. She wanted time to think things out and recover from a sense of shock and she went off on a side issue.

"I wish your mother had left things alone. It was very foolish of her to meddle, but you mustn't misjudge her altogether. I expect she's sincerely worried about you and in this country people seem to ignore the fact that their children grow up. There's a lot of *talk* about liberty from the 'rights' of the working man to those of the House of Lords, but it strikes me you're all bound—hide-bound by tradition! And so fond of patching things up instead of wiping the slate clean. As if one could rivet love like china! There's nothing so



fatal in married life as 'patching up.' Honesty is the only base for happiness between a man and a woman; and here again you're evading main issues—both of you—playing a part! I sure don't like it." She shook her head. "I'd far rather you had a divorce."

Deirdre started.

"Oh—but I *couldn't*! I've no grounds for any action."

Mrs. Thursby scoffed at this.

"I suppose if Mark were a maniac or a drunkard you'd still be chained to him, at a risk to yourself and the next generation. Your divorce laws make me tired!" She drew her tiny figure erect as though she were fighting the subtle infection. "Now, here's a case where you each desire—or so you believe—to become free. With no children to complicate matters and separate incomes—all fair sailing! Yet you're tied hand and foot for life unless you risk a public scandal by an act of folly or something worse. It's putting a premium on temptation!"

"Legally, Mark, against your will, can force you to return to him or make your life a martyrdom by haunting you wherever you go." She winced as she faced the fact. "And you call this a 'free country'!"

"I could get a separation, perhaps?"

"A weak form of compromise—not just to either party, with no possibility of re-marriage."

Deirdre smiled scornfully.

"*That* wouldn't trouble me. I've no wish to experiment further."

"Not now," Mrs. Thursby returned. "But you can't answer for the future. You were never meant to live alone—too generous for a misanthrope. I expect your mother realized this—you mustn't be too hard on her."

But Deirdre, deeply absorbed in the problem itself, evaded this opening.

"I don't think Mark would ever *insist*. I mean on my returning to him. He's too proud to risk a refusal. I guessed that the day he came here. Of course, he's most conventional and he'd hate the idea of people talking. That was the reason he asked me to go and . . .

*show* myself with him at Le Touquet! No, I shall never risk it again. Unless——" she paused uncertainly.

"Yes?" came the quiet voice.

Deirdre was staring ahead as though she could pierce the dim future.

"If he were ill—very ill——" she drew her breath through her teeth sharply. "I don't know, even then!" Her face was a mixture of scorn and despair. "How can I tell? Oh, it's all so hard! You'll think me weak and vacillating—but there it is—ten years. It's a long time—the best years of one's life. It's not so easy to forget . . . everything. There are memories, some happy——" her voice quivered. "One's pride wars with one's pity. And Mark's so helpless—in many ways. If he were ill and wanted me—the *real* me—with all his soul, I'd go back, I believe—anyhow, for a time. But I wouldn't do it just to be the housekeeper and——" she flushed, leaving the sentence incomplete. "*Never!* It's profaning love."

Mrs. Thursby nodded her head. At last she saw a glimmer of light, but she kept her knowledge to herself. She realised that the crux of the matter lay in the war of temperaments—the idealistic and material.

Deirdre went on again. She seemed to be talking to herself, disjointedly, as though alone.

"If he needed me—as I am—the intellectual side as well, for a companion, a true helpmate, I'd try and put up with his deadly temper. But to simulate passion I don't feel—to move silent about his house in between brief spurts of affection, as a part of his scheme of economy: bereft of all that is sweet in life, neglected, scolded, shouted at—shamed before my own servants—it's selling one's soul for the price of one's food; it's nothing less than prostitution!"

Her voice rang fearless through the room.

"There—it's out! It sounds vile. But it's the truth—the naked truth!"

Loosening her hand from the other's clasp, she rose to her feet with a free gesture and stood facing the white-haired woman.

"Here I lead an honest life, with liberty of mind and

body. I'm better for it—finer—cleaner! I'm winning back my self-respect. No more pretence and subterfuge; weak pardons whilst insults rankle; half-loves and half-desires and the shame of perpetual compromise."

Her eyes shone. She had reached the point of decision after long hours of thought.

Mrs. Thursby understood. Here was no heedless outburst of temper, but a soul which had found itself, through pain.

It swept away the American's last doubt and it appealed to her own ardent femininity and strong national instinct for freedom.

"You're right. I sure agree with you. Stay here and wait events. If Mark's some man he'll win you yet. If not, you've earned your liberty. I wish you could have it fixed by law, but perhaps there will be no need for that. Meanwhile, don't worry any."

She caught the infection of Deirdre's mood, and, restless herself, began to move up and down the narrow room, finding relief in definite action.

"I'm not afraid for you in the end. People might say I had no right to encourage you to rebel. Your mother would; but she's no judge, too absorbed in conventional claims.

"You've gone through a bitter fight. I reckon you've won the right to choose. It mayn't last—this breathing space. Time has a habit of hustling events! But it's healing you, renewing your spirit, arming you for what lies ahead.

"Don't look back—look forward. You're still young, for all your talk, and every age brings its blessing. There's more to that than a platitude! I've proved it myself and you will too. Youth is sweet but I've learnt this secret: it's only sweet if one *makes* it so. It's what one brings to life oneself. And that's true of old age! It's the spirit within that really counts—the young heart in the old body. The flesh fades but the soul goes on, growing in beauty and understanding."

"Yours does." Deirdre checked the speaker in her turbulent walk and clung to her for a moment. Then she held her at arm's length with a laugh that was

tremulous but sweet. "You dear brave thing—what a mite you are! How do you get that big soul tucked away in your tiny body?"

"I don't. It goes out in filaments all over the world to those I love." Mrs. Thursby gazed deep into the beautiful tender eyes. "Haven't you felt it drifting about like thistledown at Four Corners?"

"I believe I have. It's part of the spell this dear old place has cast upon me. I can *never* be grateful enough to you—you *perfect* fairy godmother!"

"Then will you do something to please me, sweet?"

"Yes, of course—if I can!"

"Write a nice letter to your mother."

Deirdre drew back. "Why? I must have your reason first."

"It's a simple one," said Cousin Maddie. "But I wrap it up in excuses. One of these is purely worldly. I think just now it is hardly wise for you to break away from your people. Another thing is—I know your mother. She has always ruled in her own house and she's gotten the habit—you can't change her. She *means* well—now, don't smile! I know they're the worst class to deal with. They think it's enough to have virtuous intentions without using the brains God gave them. They won't face things from all sides, but content themselves with a moral squint, leaving the rest to Providence, whose hands are full of graver matters than providing myopic glasses for saints! Your mother can only see in a circle—a narrow one that turns on herself—but you're included in the vision. She's bound to be worried about you, child."

She paused, a pleading look on her face.

"But the 'real reason'—you haven't told me." Deirdre gave her a loving shake. "I'm not to be drawn down a side track leading to theories—and opticians!"

Mrs. Thursby absently straightened the soft collar of lawn that was open at the speaker's throat.

"Did I give you that little brooch? I seem to remember it, somehow."

Then she looked up and nodded her head, as Deirdre made no reply.

"You're an obstinate woman! You want my secret? Well——" she paused, a divine smile lighting up the dark eyes and playing about her humorous mouth.

"It's just—that I'm a mother myself!"

## CHAPTER XVII

To please her cousin, Deirdre wore the new frock next day; a simple but very charming one in navy blue, with a deep collar of Dutch linen in which quaint stripes of brown and orange predominated.

The sombre scheme suited her and Mrs. Thursby was satisfied as she marked how the shady sailor hat of indigo straw, with its narrow wreath of little Tangerine oranges, accentuated the blue of her eyes and the red-brown gleams in Deirdre's hair.

"You look absurdly young, my dear," her godmother said with a smile, as they settled themselves in the station cab ordered for the great occasion. To herself she added: "And how Mark can risk the chance of losing you is beyond all comprehension. The man's either blind or a fool!"

But out aloud she ran on:

"Your carriage hardly matches your gown! Will it hold together as far as the Hall? The cab, I mean, not the stitches."

"I think so—if we sit still!" Deirdre laughed at the question. For the archaic conveyance with its curious smell of mouldy leather and springless heavily jolting frame seemed to warrant the remark.

"It's only a mile to the North lodge. I generally take a short cut through the woods, but I thought to-day you would find it wet; and, besides this, by the time you've been all round the gardens I'm sure you'll have had enough walking."

Mrs. Thursby nodded her head, peering out through the lowered window as they toiled up the long hill behind the equally ancient horse.

"It seems strange to be here again. I was too busy getting settled to explore beyond the village street. Then, as you know, I left in haste when my little Lisa was taken sick. I hardly know the place at all."

"You'll lose your heart to the Hall—it's centuries old and full of treasures. There's the church!" She went on to talk of the "Mesurier tomb."

They reached at length the lodge gates and, passing through, found themselves in the long avenue of limes. Bees were still busy there, though the frosty mornings were heralding in Autumn unmistakably. Between the trees they could see the bracken, stretching away on either side, crisp and golden, and as they approached the crescent curve of the woods they caught splashes of red and brown where the leaves were turning rapidly.

The cab emerged from the shady arch where the branches met overhead and began to climb the upward slope that was capped by the Hall, grey and massive, against a cloud-flecked sky of blue.

Mrs. Thursby was quite excited.

"Say, isn't that a picture! It's like a page of history—the sort of place one sees in a siege in some old book of the Wars of the Roses. I'd no idea there was anything so fine as this in sleepy Weavers."

They were ushered in solemnly by Chivers. Hyacinth ran to meet them from where she was putting the last touch to a bowl of roses in the hall.

"There you are! I'm so glad." She kissed Deirdre lovingly and turned to greet her other guest.

"I've heard *such* a lot about you! I've been simply dying to meet you."

The hearty welcome pleased Mrs. Thursby, prepared for a more formal one, with her usual mistrust of "British stiffness!"

"I'm ve-ry pleased to make your acquaintance." She shook the delicate hand warmly. "And what a perfect home you have." Her eyes went up to the space above her.

Hyacinth whispered to Deirdre.

"I've sent Rollo up to change. He had on his oldest clothes. I had to be very firm with him."

The phrase fell quaintly from her lips. It was evident that she was anxious to do honour to Deirdre's guest.

"*Here he comes!*"

At the head of the stairs the Squire appeared, unusually neat in a dark blue suit and high collar. A mischievous smile was on his face. Deirdre guessed that he was amused at his daughter's sudden conventionality.

"Good morning!" He waved his hand.

Mrs. Thursby, looking up, thought how he fitted into the picture with his keen, aristocratic face, easy limbs and air of breeding.

"A fascinating man," she decided as she watched his meeting with Deirdre and his introduction to herself.

Never at a loss for words, she began to move round the hall, her host beside her, admiring the old furniture. The Squire, inclined to be critical, found that this tiny American woman knew her subject thoroughly and in a few minutes they were engrossed in a discussion on old pewter.

"I wish I had this set complete. They're 'Merry Men' plates," said the Squire. He reached up to the shelf above him and took one down for his guest to examine.

"They're dated, you see, 1702." He read out the inscription, smiling:

"What is a merry man?  
Let him do what he can  
To entertain his guests,  
With wine and merry jests.  
But if his wife does frown,  
All merriment goes down."

Mrs. Thursby laughed.

"A very proper sentiment too!"

The Squire nodded.

"And more refined than this one, for instance." He held out a "London Plate" for her to read the words in the centre.

She deciphered it eagerly:

"When this you use  
Have what you chews,"

and catching the Squire's mischievous glance, laughed again, heartily.



Hyacinth, watching the pair, slipped an arm through Deirdre's with a quick sigh of relief.

"That's all right," she confided. "Rollo is so tiresome sometimes. But I think to-day he's going to be good. How pretty her white hair is!—and I like the way she holds her head. Like a bird—I'm sure she's a dear!" Her eyes ran over Deirdre's frock.

"That's new, isn't it? I don't think I ever saw it before."

"Yes—it's a present from Cousin Maddie. She brought it me from Paul Poiret's."

Hyacinth was struck by a thought.

"Rollo!" she called across the hall. "You and Deirdre match each other. Blue serge and a touch of yellow—in your tie and her hat! Did you evolve the scheme together?"

"She copied me," said Mesurier promptly. "She knows that I set a fashion in dress." He slipped a finger inside his collar with a comical glance at the household tyrant. "*Your* fault—I'm so unhappy."

"Take it off," said Hyacinth, relenting as she saw him wriggle his bronzed neck in the starched grip. She explained simply to Mrs. Thursby.

"I made him put it on—for you. He generally wears the turn-down kind, or none at all."

Mrs. Thursby, catching Deirdre's twinkling eyes, choked back her rising mirth. For Mesurier had the guilty look of a schoolboy, found out!

She turned to him.

"I'm highly flattered. '*Il faut souffrir pour être beau.*' But I'm sure you're happier as you were in that little sketch I saw last night, with a nice gipsy handkerchief knotted loosely round your throat?"

"What sketch?" He seemed surprised. Deirdre darted a warning glance at the first speaker, but Mrs. Thursby was too mischievous to desist.

"You mean to say you haven't seen it? Why, it's excellent—quite one of her best!"

"No." He lifted a bowl from the table. "Are you fond of Lowestoft china?"

"Sure." She laughed but took the hint. "That's a

beautiful piece." She drew off her glove and passed her hand over the glaze. "Doesn't it *feel* delicious?" she said. "Porcelain always talks to me, and this has a history to tell."

The butler announced that lunch was ready, and they moved into the dining-room.

Here again it was evident that the young hostess had done her best to make an extra hospitable effort.

It pleased Deirdre; she guessed the reason. It lay in the girl's love for herself and besides this she could see that her godmother was impressed. She had rather dreaded the meeting between the latter and her new friends, for she knew that Mrs. Thursby was in many ways critical.

The talk drifted to places abroad and here the Squire held the advantage. The American knew all the beaten tracks, but Mesurier's knowledge went deeper than this. They found, however, a friend in common—Ezio Barri, the Florentine sculptor.

"I ran across him at Bellaggio this summer," said Mrs. Thursby. "He was staying at a villa there."

"With the Mordinis?" Rollo asked.

"Yes, the same old faithful friendship. Lettice and he are always together. It's quite a recognised institution! I used to know her as a girl before she married Count Gino. She lived not far from us in New York. A dear woman—very artistic. I don't wonder Barri admires her. Of course, it's known to be quite platonic."

Mesurier smiled.

"Why label it? Romance is so scarce in this work-a-day world."

Mrs. Thursby's eyes narrowed.

"You seem to regret my definition. Yet to me it seems a perfect thing that a friendship like that *can* exist without the slightest misunderstanding."

"No doubt." Mesurier held his ground. "It shows how popular they are! All the same, I have a suspicion that its lasting power is probably based on a little more than simple friendship. You see, I know Barri well. He's a dreamer of dreams—a real Romantic. He

asks for the best there is in life. Besides, although in theory one admits to platonic affection, I doubt if in practice it really exists—that is, between live men and women.”

Mrs. Thursby frowned at this. She drew a strongly marked line between flirtation and anything stronger, and held the puritanical views of many of her countrywomen.

“I should be very sorry,” she said, and her voice was a shade stiff, “to think that there was anything further or to hold the slightest doubt of it.”

“Why?” Mesurier’s mouth hardened. “I never can understand why love is looked on as a subtle disgrace. I think—controlled—that it completes the circle of a perfect friendship. That it quickens the spark of understanding and breaks down the barrier of sex. There must always be antagonism between a man and a woman. It’s one of Nature’s mysteries. Love alone seems to bridge it.”

“Rather a dangerous doctrine.” His visitor was studying the mood reflected in his face. She was somewhat surprised by the open way he discussed the question and still more by the downright line he took. She began to mistrust this friend of Deirdre’s.

The Squire, warming to his subject, went on undeterred by her slightly aggressive attitude. “I’m inclined to think that a knowledge of love is a stimulant to mental sympathy. If a man really cares for a woman and knows that the feeling is returned, he lays aside his mask of reserve, particularly a Southerner! He can afford to be natural—to show himself as he really is, without the trappings of convention—and his thoughts leap to meet hers. It’s the surest key to telepathy.”

“That’s all very well with single people,” Mrs. Thursby interposed, “but Lettice is *married*.” She underlined it.

Mesurier, to her annoyance, laughed.

“Well, we’ll grant that makes a difference! To *her*. But what about poor Barri? Setting aside conventional laws——” He paused, aware for the first time of the *silence* of the other pair.

Hyacinth was drinking in the conversation eagerly, and the Squire with a sudden flicker of conscience abandoned his argument.

"As a matter of fact, it all depends on the individual," he wound up lamely. "One can't make rules for other people. Love is a personal equation."

His eyes returned to his daughter.

"What do you say, Hyacinth, out of the depths of your experience?"

She shrugged her shoulders, inwardly vexed, and glanced across at Mrs. Thursby.

"He always treats me like a child! But I'm not—I'm eighteen next birthday."

"A lovely age," the American smiled. "I envy you! Are you fond of dancing?" She was rather glad to change the topic. "Do you get many balls round here?"

"No. I've never been to one. Not in this country," Hyacinth answered. "But I can dance," she added gravely.

Mrs. Thursby looked surprised. She wondered if Mesurier played the part of indifferent parent, keeping the girl selfishly away from the pleasures due to her age.

But Hyacinth ran on: "The last time was in Paris. Such fun! D'you remember, Rollo? At the Bal Tabarin."

Deirdre interposed.

"Do tell us all about it." She had seen her god-mother's eyes widen, but she could not resist the temptation of hearing the girl's account of the evening and anything seemed better than a return to the old topic.

"We were coming back from Corsica," said Hyacinth, "and we stopped for the night in Paris. We'd only hand luggage with us and we couldn't go to the Opera or any place where you must dress. So Rollo suggested Montmartre, knowing I'd always longed to explore it since Chris told me how jolly it was. We dined at a little restaurant and then drove to a cabaret—such a fascinating place!—like a kitchen, with copper pans hung round a deep grate. No proper platform, just a piano, and the audience sat round little tables anywhere.

We had cherry brandy—with cherries in it—awfully nice! And people sang, one after another, and we all joined in the chorus. There was one man with a wonderful voice who, it turned out, was the 'patron.' He thought that I was Rollo's wife!" she laughed gaily. "Didn't he, Rollo? You remember—he called me '*la petite femme*'—and then when you wouldn't buy those songs he said: '*Il n'est pas généreux, ton homme!*' That was to me, and you were furious! You *must* remember?"

"Yes," said Mesurier, rather quickly, "I think I do. Go on."

"Well, we stayed there till ever so late and then we went on to the ball. Rollo and I danced hard—a good floor and an excellent band. The people *were* so funny to watch! It was a special Spanish night and they had a troupe of gipsy dancers. But I didn't think very much of them—not half so good as some we had seen in an underground café in Seville. Still it was very cheery and gay and everybody seemed so happy. At last, when the daylight was coming in, we decided to go; but outside it was so fresh and clear and lovely it seemed a shame to think of bed. So we drove right out into the Bois. I'll never forget it." Her face lit up. "After all that heat and noise, the cool dewy green of the leaves, with the lake asleep and the absolute stillness. The *cocher* must have thought us mad! He took us, grumbling, to St. Cloud and we breakfasted on a balcony overlooking the broad river—lovely new rolls, all crisp, with honey."

She smiled now at the recollection.

"What an evening's entertainment! Weren't you tired?" Mrs. Thursby looked curiously at the girl.

"Not a bit! I'm never tired. We were going home the same day, but when we got to Dieppe the sea looked *too* tempting. So we stopped there for a few days and had some bathing and then Rollo thought I ought to see Rouen. We didn't get back for another month!"

"We're rather erratic travellers," the Squire explained cheerfully. "The secret, of course, is to have no luggage. In the end we found ourselves once more in Paris and

this suggested a week in Brussels, so we came home that way."

"But what do you do about clothes?" Mrs. Thursby's massive trunks formed no light item in her progress.

"Oh, buy things as we go along—when the others wear out," Hyacinth answered. "We always take a change with us and one generally finds a shop somewhere."

She spoke so indifferently that Mrs. Thursby stared at her.

"But don't you like pretty frocks?"

"Not to *wear*," said Hyacinth. "I like to see them on other people, but here at Weavers one doesn't want them. It must be dreadful to have to think all the time of one's appearance: It's being a slave to one's possessions! You know what Thoreau says about it: 'A woman's dress is never done.' So I try and avoid that tax on life—as far as propriety permits!" She laughed as she added the saving clause.

"Another clever thing he says is: 'Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes and not rather a new wearer of clothes. If there is not a new man, how can the clothes be made to fit?' I like that, don't you?"

"In theory," her guest smiled. "But I must admit I'm very fond of wearing pretty things myself. And it makes the world a brighter place."

"I daresay it does, when you live in a town." Hyacinth was thinking it over. "It breaks the monotony of the streets; but in the country Nature supplies colouring and fresh green. And you can't garden in frills and laces! I like to feel free and able to move. That's partly why I hate London. Just think of the time wasted on changing into fresh frocks at different hours; and you're just the same yourself, really—all that matters—underneath. One oughtn't to need silks and satins to show to which class one belongs! After all, that's the main idea when one gets down to primary causes. To impress the world with one's social status through one's clothes—it seems so childish."

She glanced across at the Squire, watching her with serious eyes. He realised her mute appeal and chimed in, interested.

"Thoreau isn't sure there. D'you remember he says—I think it's in 'Walden'—'It is an interesting question how far men would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothes.' When I read the passage it made me think of the dear old Hans Andersen story and the Emperor, robed in majesty—and nothing else!—who found to his cost that his people laughed behind his back."

Mrs. Thursby smiled at this.

"Which shews that one mustn't run to extremes."

"Unless they meet," suggested the Squire. "Or are properly patched! Is it too chilly, do you think, to have our coffee outside? The sun is hot but the wind's in the East."

"If I may choose, I'd prefer it here. When you get to my age you'll understand." She nodded her white head gaily. "One's circulation is not so brisk, however young one's heart remains."

The Squire's eyes thoughtfully rested on the speaker's face.

"Yes," he said, "you hold that secret."

He did not attempt to explain his words, but Mrs. Thursby understood. For the first time she felt a wave of sympathy pass between them.

"Thank you."

Hyacinth and Deirdre were talking together. She leaned forward, under cover of their chatter and added in a lower tone,

"As an old woman still deeply in love with youth, I appreciate the compliment. For you speak from a sure sense of advantage and I accept the flattery, knowing the years that lie between us. This really is a confession of weakness!" She paused for a second, then went on before he could say the obvious thing: "If men would only understand the power they have and use it wisely there would be fewer unhappy women."

Mesurier's face grew rather grave.

"I don't quite gather what you mean. I doubt, apart

from a physical one, if my sex can lay claim to any advantage over your own."

"Don't you?" Her fine brows went up with a slightly incredulous expression. "Yet they still hold the initiative in most emotional situations. It is theirs to ask and the woman to give."

"Or withhold," the Squire interposed shrewdly.

"Mercifully." She smiled at him but went on determinedly. "For instance, to go back to that case under discussion just now—the Moldini friendship——" her eyes narrowed. "Barri could do immense harm if he chose to play an ignoble part. I'm fond of Lettice. I don't think she'd ever allow anything to sway her own rigid sense of virtue, but the chance is it could undermine insidiously her love for her husband. You never can tell—that's the trouble! I believe in friendship, honest friendship and—I'm no prude!—in honest flirtation, where both know they are playing a game with no deeper sentiment. But a friendship that holds the germ of passion is always dangerous to a woman. I don't mean in a worldly sense alone, I mean spiritually. For women are easily moved by pity—the generous ones—and there's always a risk that they may confuse pity with love, and then the trouble gets acute."

"But supposing," said Mesurier, "that pity held no part in it, isn't love better than friendship? I'm not talking now of passion but the love which can understand and *protect*—give without hope of any reward?"

Mrs. Thursby shook her head.

"If it's as fine and unselfish as that it would not shrink from sacrifice. I don't believe in compromise. The man would see that retreat alone was the only honourable course. You can't have a woman balanced between two men who both love her. It's an ambiguous position full of warring influences."

She laid down her coffee cup, aware of a silence on her right, and glanced across at Hyacinth.

"Would you like to come out now," said the girl, "and have a stroll around the garden?"

She rose from her chair eagerly as Mrs. Thursby acquiesced.



"I want so much to see your flowers. Deirdre has been raving about them and your 'blue vista.' You see, I know all about it," she added, smiling.

Hyacinth held the window back for Mrs. Thursby to pass through.

"Take care—there's a deep step. That's right—now, across the lawn. I hope your shoes are thick enough. There was some heavy rain last night."

Mesurier checked Deirdre as she was following the pair.

"Wait a minute! You'd better light your cigarette in here," he said. He held out his case to her and struck a match, then lowered his voice.

"Do I look improved—morally?" His face was full of quiet mischief.

Deirdre was obliged to laugh.

"Why? She hasn't been scolding you?"

"Deliciously. She's a perfect dear! All by inference, you know, so as not to wound my feelings."

"But what about?" asked Deirdre.

"Ah . . . !" He refused to be drawn. "Come along."

Side by side they went down the pair of steps on to the lawn. But Deirdre, unaccustomed to the narrow skirt decreed by Paris, tripped over the lower one.

The Squire's hand shot out and saved her narrowly from disaster.

"Hold up!" he laughed at her.

Mrs. Thursby had turned round and was waiting beside Hyacinth. The Squire did not relinquish his grasp. Instead, he slipped his hand further through Deirdre's arm, his face careless.

"What's the idea of having a skirt barely a yard in circumference? Economy? I've a great mind to make you run across the lawn!"

"No, Rollo!" Hyacinth cried. "You mustn't, to-day." She frowned at him. "It's her best frock," she added severely.

They all laughed at this simple statement.

Mrs. Thursby, watching the pair, began to doubt her *first impressions*.

"There's nothing in it," she said to herself. "He'd be more careful if there were."

The Squire, reading the thought in her face, preserved an impassive countenance.

## CHAPTER XVIII

DEIRDRE stood watching the train puff out of the village station, a little surprised at her own mixed feelings over Mrs. Thursby's departure.

Her godmother had lingered on from day to day, loth to leave, enjoying the novel simplicity of this quiet life with the woman she loved.

They had not seen the Squire again. He had left for town on the morning after their lunch at the Hall, but Hyacinth had flitted in and out of Four Corners, taking the pair for long drives whenever the weather favoured the scheme.

Now as a cold wind stirred the trees at the end of the narrow country platform and the train vanished out of sight, Deirdre, with a little shiver, set out homewards, her face thoughtful.

She was trying in vain to analyse the faint feeling of relief that deadened her genuine regret in saying good-bye to "Cousin Maddie."

"I must be getting a regular hermit." She marched briskly down the road, picking her way between the puddles, for the rain had been heavy in the night. "I really enjoy being alone. It's odd—because I never used to. But, somehow, with Cousin Maddie here I seem to have had no time to think! Although I'm awfully fond of her, that curious restlessness of hers gets on one's nerves; she's never still or happy unless she's planning something. And yet, such a darling!" She caught herself up, aware of a hint of disloyalty. "I suppose it's really my own fault. I've got into a hopeless groove and thoroughly out of worldly ways. And she's a woman of the world—cosmopolitan to the core." Her brows met in a quick frown. "Whilst I'm an idle Bohemian! At heart she's quite conventional; she doesn't approve of all I do. Yet I always believed that Ameri-

cans were more broad-minded, as a nation, over friendships between men and women."

She paused in her analysis, aware of reaching the crux of the matter. For in their long talks together the older woman had introduced a note of warning—not always veiled—in reference to Mesurier. Although Mrs. Thursby had recognised the man's intellectual charm, she had not been attracted to the Squire, save for a single fleeting moment. She mistrusted his moral principles and the influence he might possess.

The effect of her attitude had been to arouse in Deirdre to the full the partisan spirit. Loyally she had defended the absent friend and Mrs. Thursby had recognised—too late—the mistake that she had made.

They had dropped the subject by tacit consent, but a faint sense of injustice rankled sub-consciously in Deirdre's mind and now in her first moments of freedom from the duties of hostess she was aware that the way lay open once again to the old happy comradeship.

For, somehow, Weavers without the Squire seemed shorn of its personality. She had hardly realised how much he counted in the daily round. He had given her what she so sorely lacked; a brain to pit her own against and beyond this he had opened out a new world—that of Nature. She felt for him the eager affection which draws a pupil to a teacher and although at times they disagreed, on many points their beliefs touched. Her cramped intellectuality had unfolded in this new warmth and the womanhood in her was flattered by the equal terms on which they met.

Mrs. Thursby had narrowed the outlook to the old standard of convention; had seen in it a question of sex and possible dangers arising therefrom. The spark of truth that lay concealed in her godmother's dictum added point to the contentions; for Deirdre, incurably honest, could not avoid the knowledge of how much the Squire admired her. She knew he fled from most of her sex, but sought her out continuously, and she tried to place this to the score of her influence over Hyacinth.

Yet in her heart a still voice sang: "He likes you, and needs you—for yourself!"

Ah! that "need": the eternal cry of generous lonely womanhood; of thwarted maternity and passion, wasted love and broken hopes. . . .

"Good morning, Mrs. Caradoc."

She started. The Rector stood before her. In her absorption she had not seen him emerge from a neighbouring cottage.

Her face cleared as she shook hands.

"How are you? I've just been up to the station to speed my parting guest. She's sailing for New York to-morrow."

"Yes? You'll miss her," he suggested. "And Weavers will be emptier still! So many people are away. I had a line from my wife this morning"—he fell into step by her side—"and where do you think she is now? In Dieppe! The postmark astonished me! She was staying, you know, with Daisy at Seaford before the child went back to school and it seems Mrs. Pontefract wired to her to come over by Newhaven. So Daisy was packed off to my sister and Dora crossed on Thursday morning."

"I should think she would enjoy Dieppe."

"Yes, a nice change for her; it's most kind of Mrs. Pontefract. Of course, she's going as her guest. Chris has had to return to London on urgent business—his wife is alone. Dora will keep her company and she seems delighted at the prospect."

He paused outside Deirdre's gate.

"The Squire is away, too, I hear. No, thanks, I won't come in. I'm on my way to Brewer's farm. What was I saying? Ah, yes—Mesurier—have you any idea of the day he comes back?"

"On Monday or Tuesday, Hyacinth thinks." She lifted the latch of the door as she spoke. "Do have a cup of tea first—it's all ready." She smiled at him. For a moment he wavered, then shook his head.

"Honestly, I haven't time. I have to be home for a vestry meeting after my business with Tom Brewer."

A voice came out of the shadowy hall.

"Is that Gage, resisting temptation?"

To Deirdre's astonishment, Pontefract appeared on the threshold.

"I'm not burgling," he explained as he shook hands with his hostess. "It's Day's fault—she asked me to stay and said you'd be sorry to have missed me! This bucked me up so tremendously I've been sitting here for twenty minutes reading a Harrod's catalogue. The pictures are most absorbing! I've learnt such a lot about woman's dress—can't think where you put it away—it must be like those Chinese puzzles, one box inside another! Hope you don't mind my taking possession of Four Corners in your absence?"

"I shall count the silver," said Deirdre, laughing.

The Rector glanced from one to the other, and apparently soothed by his scrutiny, indulged in a sympathetic chuckle.

"That's right—don't trust him. He's always up to some mischief." Then, more gravely: "And how's Mrs. Chris?" His eyes ran over the young man with his bronzed face and open smile. "I hear my wife's taking your place, *pro tem*, and that you're in London!—under press of urgent business."

"So I was, until to-day. Then as I had a few hours clear I thought I'd run down and see Dawkins. Hotspur's suddenly gone lame—my favourite hunter," he explained, turning to Mrs. Caradoc.

"I'm so sorry. Is that the bay with the white sock?"

"Yes"—he nodded—"worse luck! Some confounded carelessness. He was sound as a bell when I left home. Looks as if he'd strained a sinew."

For a moment Deirdre felt inclined to tell him of the midnight rider. Then caution intervened; it was really no affair of hers.

"Very annoying," said the Rector. "What are you doing this evening? Will you share my frugal bachelor meal?"

"Thanks, but I'm bound to get back to the Grange—the vet's coming after dinner. Otherwise I'd have jumped at it. Like old times." His face saddened. For

a moment his eyes met the Rector's with an almost challenging note of affection.

Gage checked a sudden sigh.

"Wish you could! Well, I must be off. *Au revoir*, Mrs Caradoc. Look after this prodigal son, home from the husks of Dieppe!"

"I can offer a fatted goat," said Deirdre. "I'm afraid Four Corners won't run to a calf."

The Rector laughed, almost boyishly.

"I don't expect he'd notice the difference—not if he were dining with you!" And, as if aware of his temerity, lifted his dusty clerical hat and was off before she found a reply.

"Good old Gage!" said Pontefract.

"Yes, he's a dear." She closed the door. "Always slaving for other people." She glanced up at her visitor. "I can't think why——" And stopped abruptly.

"Neither can I," he smiled back, guessing that the unspoken words referred to the rector's unsuitable marriage. "Lord!—the mistakes one makes in life."

He dropped heavily into a chair, stretching his long legs stiffly.

"You're quite sure I'm not in the way? It was rather cool my waiting for you, but I thought I'd just like to see you. This cottage always seems to me an oasis in the midst of the desert."

"I'm very glad. I was feeling lonely."

He nodded his head.

"I expect you do—sometimes. It's a quiet place. If it weren't for the Mesuriers I doubt if I could stick it myself. Rollo's away?" His voice was abrupt.

"Yes, a duty visit to town. But Hyacinth is at the Hall. Have you seen her?"

"No." He stooped down and tucked a boot-lace into place. "I must try and run in early to-morrow before I catch the express to town."

"Can't you stay over Sunday? The glass is going up with a run, and if the weather proved kind we might all three have a picnic somewhere."

"Very tempting; but, like Gage, my duty is spelt with

a big D. A very big one—plus a dash! It includes the night boat to Dieppe.”

Day appeared with the tea. Deirdre made a sign to check her.

“You’d rather have a whiskey and soda, wouldn’t you?” she asked Chris.

“No, thanks. I like tea—*your* tea—it’s properly brewed.”

He gave Day a sidelong look out of his mischievous hazel eyes, and received a discreet little smile in return.

“And buttered toast!” he observed with gusto. “I say, will you let me Four Corners with all it contains? I’m coveting! Your house, and your goat, and your toast, and your maid.” Day vanished to enjoy her stifled laughter in the pantry.

“Honestly,” he ran on, “it’s just what I should like myself—an awfully cosy little place. I’m not in love with the Grange. It’s so horribly new and over-furnished. Whilst this——” His eyes wandered about and the smile died out of them. “Have you ever been to my old home, now the ‘country seat’ of Byng, M.P.?”

Faint scorn was in his voice, beneath which he masked regret.

Deirdre shook her head as she poured him out a steaming cup of the fragrant China tea—one of her new luxuries.

“That honour is not for me,” she laughed rather mischievously. “But I’ve often seen it driving past and confess to peeping through the hedge. It’s a dear old house. I can understand how fond of it you must have been.”

“Not a bad place.” The words were careless, but Deirdre was not deceived. “As a boy I had some good times there. Of course the rectory was my home, but we used to go to my grandfather in turn in the holidays. He kept a couple of ponies for us. The people round were jolly, too. Now everything is changed, all the old folks dead—or broke!—and their places sold to newcomers. Quite a different class of people, with none of the old friendliness.”

“It’s the same everywhere, I think.” She handed him



the buttered toast. "Put it by you and help yourself. Here's anchovy-paste—it makes it nicer."

"Jove! I'm jolly glad I waited. How one enjoys an English tea after the 'make-belief' abroad!" He reverted to the earlier subject.

"Weavers is not the place it was. Kilby is slowly crawling out with trams and villas until one day we shall wake up to find we're a suburb! By then there'll be few of the old crowd left. I hear that the Cardines' place is to let."

"Yes, a pity. She seemed so nice. Hyacinth took me over there. But no one wants to live for long in the same house now. It's a restless age. I think, too, motor-ing's made a difference. You're not so dependent on your neighbours. The circle is wider, and so, in a sense, you never get so intimate and the old country life is altered. There's less simple hospitality—of dropping in uninvited."

Pontefract nodded.

"Too much show. I'd like myself to live in a cottage with plenty of grounds, but keep open house for my friends. Meg is quite opposed to this. She revels in long invitations and all the fuss of preparation and then everything A-I. My father-in-law was just the same. It's in the blood." His face clouded.

"You've just made me realize that there's no cake for tea to-day." Deirdre smiled.

"Oh, damn the cake!" said Pontefract. Their eyes met and they both laughed.

Then he apologized.

"Sorry! The word slipped out. Good biz old Gage has gone."

"I'll forgive you—*this* time. I don't expect these ancient walls are over-shocked. More tea?" She refilled his cup.

"Not they!" Pontefract laughed. "I've spent some cheery evenings here. I shouldn't mind living at Four Corners. Which reminds me"—he drew out a pocket-book—"what do you think of this French château?"

He handed over a snapshot, which Deirdre recognised at once.

"The 'Villa Nicolette'?" she nodded. "I've seen it before. It looks charming. Hyacinth was in love with it. She showed it to me, among others."

"Yes, I sent the child some photos." He leaned sideways and pointed out the main features eagerly. "It's above the road on the side of the hill. There's a wide verandah running round with roses and clumps of heliotrope. Only six rooms, counting the kitchen, but it's bright and airy and awfully snug. I'm glad you like it——" He hesitated. "Fact is, I've been and bought it."

"Not really?" She looked surprised.

"Yes. You see, for a long time I've been wanting a little *pied-à-terre*, somewhere right out of Weavers."

Deirdre understood. Here was another quiet haven when life became too burdensome in the company of an alien spirit.

"Of your very own," she said softly.

"Exactly." His glance kindled. "I can run over there now and then with a pal and rough it—a picnic life, no pomp or ceremony! I love the sea, so the crossing's nothing and there's always Dieppe if it gets too dull. By the way"—he fidgeted for a moment—"it's a secret at present—for various reasons. I haven't told my wife about it. She'd want to go over and ferret round and put it all in apple-pie order! And I like it as it is. I've been furnishing it on the sly; plainly, you know, but my own idea. So perhaps you'd keep it to yourself."

"Of course." Her voice was cordial. "I can sympathize thoroughly. A man wants a den to himself. I feel the same about Four Corners. One makes one's own atmosphere, without—well-meant interference!"

"That's it." He nodded his head. "Besides, it's better not to talk. Not everyone understands. It's a rum world—so suspicious."

"You're right." Her voice was a shade bitter. Her thoughts flew back to Mrs. Thursby and her attitude towards the Squire.

"If people would lead their own lives and allow their neighbours to do the same without endless speculation there wouldn't be half so much trouble. They expect

faith in their own behaviour, but refuse to give it to those around them. One *ought* to believe in people." The words came out vehemently.

Pontefract stared at her. Then he gave an odd laugh. "They'd get a few knocks, though. It's not every one who deserves such implicit trust in this world. We're only human at the best! Circumstance and environment play rum tricks in a man's life." A shadow fell across his face. He went on thoughtfully, as if he were talking to himself: "One starts out to conquer the world so jolly sure of oneself and then something goes wrong, and the whole point of view's changed. A man must have some safety-valve—if it's only hunting, or golf, or drink! You can't be pinned down to narrow rules and regulations all day long.

"Sometimes I think I shall clear out—get off to the Colonies—start afresh. But Lord knows if I'd make any better job of it!"

He ended on a note of despair. Deirdre, divining much, felt a sudden wave of pity.

She leaned forward impulsively.

"I know—it's frightfully hard. One feels walled-in with no way out. But that's where our vision's clouded. There's almost always a road of escape. It will come to you—suddenly. But it's awfully difficult to be patient"—she hesitated, then faced it boldly—"and bear the idiosyncrasies of people with whom one is rarely in touch. I've been hopeless myself at times, and then a way was opened out, and I took it"—her voice dropped a tone—"I think these things are all arranged."

Pontefract through narrowed lids was watching her face, with its changing moods.

"By Providence?" The words jarred with their undercurrent of cynicism.

Deirdre flushed, but recovered herself.

"Yes." It cost her an effort to say it.

The man looked suddenly ashamed.

"Perhaps you're right. I don't know. I think it's been mostly your own pluck."

He rose to his feet, as he spoke, with a quick glance at the clock.

"But I shan't forget your kindness to me. I'm a bit of a rotter, but all the same I know a good woman when I see one—and a good friend. You're both!" He held out his hand, slightly confused.

Deirdre did not answer him, but her serious eyes revealed her thoughts. He looked deep into them for a second, then his own fell before them.

"Good-bye. I'll come again, on my return, if I may?" He tried to throw a shade of lightness into his voice: "And pay toll! I can't pass the Turnpike Lodge without seeing the Turnpike Lady! Can I bring you anything from Dieppe?"

"Yes," she smiled up at him, "I'd like a packet of post-cards, please. The brighter the better—they're not for myself, but for Day, who rejoices in an album. My friends all offer contributions."

"She shall have the best the place provides, with Reckitt skies and a pea-green sea." He paused in the doorway, mischievous. "There *are* postcards at Dieppe. . . ."

"No! You are not to corrupt my maid. Nothing too 'French' will pass the Censor!"

"Ha, ha!" his laugh rang out. "You'd better open the post-bag yourself! Won't it be a shock for Weavers?"

And with this he departed, chuckling.

## CHAPTER XIX

"THE groom from the Hall, mum, has brought this." Day handed her mistress a note. "He doesn't know if there's an answer."

Deirdre opened the envelope and read the contents with a slight frown.

"No; he can go. It's from Miss Mesurier. She isn't coming to supper to-night—a bad headache—what a pity! I thought she looked pale in church this morning."

"Yes'm. Will you want the cutlets?"

"No, just the soup and salad. See that Wade takes back those baskets and I think, perhaps, I'll scribble a line."

She sat down, wrote a few words of sympathy and regret, and gave it to Day, whose face reflected her own obvious disappointment.

"It can't be helped!" She smiled at the maid. "I expect it's the thunder in the air."

For the weather had changed, sultry and dry, like the ghost of the Summer stealing back, heavy-browed and winged with depression, heralding an electric storm.

Deirdre, conscious of the heat, followed Day down the stairs, turning instinctively to the garden where the shadows were beginning to lengthen.

As she passed through the hall she gathered up a volume of verse which had reached her by post the day before from the Squire. A letter fluttered out from the leaves. Unfolding the closely-written sheet she ran once more through the opening lines.

"Autumn and Henley go well together. Read his tribute to 'The Trees'—'God's Sentinels.'"

"In air-less London it makes me ache for the woods at home—

"Wearing the darkness like the livery  
Of some mysterious and tremendous guild."

"Much beauty is here for you. I wish I were reading over your shoulder under that clear, open sky, where high above the old church spire

"The wistful stars . . . Shine like good memories.'

"Henley is such a virile poet; I'm sure he will appeal to you—to that hint of 'boyishness' wrapped away in the folds of your femininity. There was no weakness nor compromise in his outlook on life. He *saw straight*. The essential things—faith and courage; and love, that will surely survive death.

"He suffered from poverty and ill-health, but kept his mind untainted by them through sheer pluck; first a man and then a poet—not *vice versa*!

"I commend him to you, awaiting your verdict when I return on Monday night.

"Meanwhile I'm living at high pressure, driving through the business before me, amazed at the inertia of people who live by the sweat of their brow! Rodin should make a masterpiece of the British workman: a solid block of marble, suggesting arrested movement and a blind need of motive power. I don't wonder that our trade slips into foreign hands. There's no scope for initiative or any original improvement—just a crass content with 'things-as-they-are.' It gives me an uncanny dread of some great catastrophe which will tear the mask from off our eyes. Heaven grant it be not too late!

"By all of which you will realize that my temper is getting the best of me! I'm longing for some active work in the open air. In fact, I will confess to you that it's just as much as I can do to keep my hands off the pots of paint that adorn the house in Deanery Street. I *did* steal a piece of putty and amuse myself for a solid hour trying to evolve Olga out of that delectable substance! It was discovered later on by a duchess of a chambermaid in my bedroom at the *Coburg*. She asked coldly if I 'required' it."

Deirdre smiled. She could picture the scene.

She folded the letter and put it back, then moved on

down the garden to an old bench which flanked the wall beside the straggling lavender bushes.

It was a favourite corner of hers, hidden from the lane beyond. Sitting there she faced the orchard, where beneath the group of apple trees velvet shadows lay on the grass, which was lush and green in contrast to the burnt patches in the open. From the little cottage, half-screened by the high yew hedge, a thread of smoke rose straight and unwavering to the grey and copper hues of the sky. Birds twittered restlessly and a bat wheeled past, with its shrill high note, still blinded by the light.

The sound awoke a memory in Deirdre's brain of that first evening spent at Weavers, and the walk which had led to the Squire's woods; those enchanted woods where Romance still lurked, with the unsolved mystery of the Centaur.

"I've a great mind to go there to-night after supper," she said to herself. "I feel too restless to stay indoors—just in the mood for an evening stroll. And there won't be many evenings like this." Her thoughts turned regretfully to the long happy Summer days of gipsy life with the Squire and his daughter.

She foresaw that Winter must bring in its wake heavy spells of loneliness, robbing her of the excuse of picnics and gardening with her friends.

"I think I shall take up a new language—Spanish? I'd like to go to Spain. Hyacinth must give me lessons, or perhaps . . ." she left the thought unfinished.

The book lay open on her knee. In an idle mood she turned the pages, reading a verse here and there, but without its claiming her whole attention. Stray memories drifted across the outer edges of her mind: Cousin Maddie's warning talks, a pregnant phrase in a letter from Mark, announcing his speedy return to town and hinting at a "Winter together."

Pursuing his own line of action Mark slurred over the present rupture, "hoped she'd enjoyed her holiday," and suggested improvements at the flat—her room repapered, a new carpet!

The choice should lie in her own hands. Here he expressed his meaning boldly:

"Perhaps you would like to run up soon, so that the painters could start work?"

"Never!" Her lips took a firm line, her head went up defiantly. "Does he think he can win me back by a bribe? It shows how little he understands."

She thrust the insulting thought away deliberately. "That's all over. I'm going to stay on, as I am, at Weavers."

Then, as her eyes returned to the book, she saw it lay open at a page where a poem was scored with a heavy line of pencil, inviting her attention.

Eagerly she read the verses, and, little by little, resentment ebbed; a feeling of peace stole over her. It was almost as if Mesurier stood by her side, grave and thoughtful, and laid a hand upon her shoulder, upholding her with his strong friendship.

"When you are old, and I am passed away—  
Passed, and your face, your golden face, is gray—  
I think, whate'er the end, this dream of mine,  
Comforting you, a friendly star will shine  
Down the dim slope where still you stumble and stray.

"So may it be: that no dead Yesterday,  
No sad-eyed ghost but generous and gay,  
May serve you memories like almighty wine,  
When you are old!"

She drank it in with a little sigh.

"Dead Yesterday"? Why, so it was. Past and over, inviting burial. But what had it led to? A fuller life, as Death, in turn, must hold in store; the soul no longer cramped and bound by earthly prejudice and error, but free—awake, aware at last of power and immortality.

Again her lips breathed the poem, and paused at the words, "a friendly star."

Out of the darkness had come light—the starlight of an autumn friendship—pointing the path before her feet. She saw the distant goal ahead.

To be true to her creed—no compromise, no specious juggling with love and passion. She would live as her own heart dictated, lonely, perhaps, but with self-respect



and "memories like almighty wine" should comfort her in her old age.

Then in time she could comfort others—help and console.

Hyacinth rose, slim and sweet, before her mind, on the threshold of her womanhood. Deirdre registered a vow to be true to the trust which the Squire imposed. He had given her his confidence; could she not share a part of his burden?

It added a definite purpose to life, the maternal touch that Nature denied.

Mark had outlived his need of her. He had told her so in plain words. He regretted his old bachelor days and the burden of supporting her.

"You can go away—and stay away!" The speech was branded on her heart. All the years of patient work had been thrown away. She was stale to him. "Dead Yesterday!" She buried it deep.

Quick steps came up the path.

"Supper, mum." Day stood before her.

"I'm coming." She rose from the narrow bench and following up her line of thought,

"Are you happy here, Day?" she asked.

"Quite, mum." But the maid's voice lacked its usual heartiness.

Deirdre studied the faithful face.

"There's something wrong—I'm sure of it. Tell me what is troubling you."

"It's nothing, mum." The big grey eyes warmed with sudden gratitude. "Nothing for you to worrit about. Your soup will be getting cold, mum."

"I like it cold this weather." Deirdre laid a hand on her arm. "Won't you tell me? Couldn't I help? Is it that you miss London?"

"Lor', no, mum!" Day smiled. Then the shadow fell again, and she went on hurriedly. "I'm a bit bothered about my sister—the married one near Exeter, mum. I had a letter last night. Her little boy is very ill and she's none too strong herself, just now—expecting, mum, the month after next—and with her husband out of work it all seems to have come together."

"I'm very sorry," said Deirdre. "What's the matter with the child?"

"They thinks it's a galloping decline," Day explained, "and all from a chill. Such a fine big boy as he were, and now, mum, he's nothing but skin and bones, and her husband's old gentleman's died—a place where he's been for fifteen years as gardener, and it's none too easy to get another thereabouts. A married man with five children and his old mother to keep as well, and, of course, it's a trouble to my sister——" She broke off breathlessly.

"I'm sure it is. Now, how can we help her?"

"Well, mum, I was thinking, if you would be so kind as to give me my wages—as is due next week—a few days before, I could send them a trifle." Day coloured. "But not if it's putting you about."

Deirdre smiled. "You shall have them to-night. But mayn't I send her something myself?"

"Thank you, mum; there's no need." Sensitive pride was in the words, and Deirdre nodded, understanding.

"Very well, just as you like. But one thing I could easily do would be to make a few inquiries. The Squire is coming back to-morrow and he might know of a vacant place for a gardener among his friends. Would you like to have your sister here, near you, if it could be managed?"

They moved on into the house. Day was evidently thinking.

"Well, mum, it's like this: I'm sure it's very kind of you, but with relations I always hold they're best to be a journey away."

Mrs. Caradoc checked a smile.

"Perhaps it's wiser," she acquiesced.

"Yes, mum, I'm sure of it. They think more of you at a distance. Lottie's all right, mum, in her way, but I've never taken to her husband. He's got ideas in his head, about his rights and the gentry, and always running of them down. It comes, perhaps, from a gift of the tongue—folks as have a lot to say don't always care how they sez it."

She pulled out her mistress' chair. "Now, mum, d'

have your supper. That chicken broth is rather pale, but it's strong, mum. It will do you good."

Deirdre took a spoonful and nodded.

"It's delicious—I know this is *your* cooking."

Day beamed back at her.

"Yes'm. Mrs. Slack was out yesterday, so I got my chance." Her voice was tenderly triumphant.

For Day had mastered the secret of love; service, that gift which comes from the heart—freely offered and doubly sweet when appreciated by the loved one.

"You like to do things for me, Day?"

The maid's eyes opened wide.

"Why, yes, mum; that's what I'm here for."

The simple answer touched her mistress.

"And I should like to do things for you, but you won't let me." She held out her hand. "Now, Day, just for once, mayn't I have my own way and the pleasure of helping your family?"

Day, rather nervously, touched the smooth slender fingers.

"My hands aren't fit, mum—with the cooking—but I'm sure I'm grateful——" She hesitated.

"Of course you must send it from yourself." Deirdre followed up her advantage. "I can understand your sister is proud and mightn't care for gifts from strangers. I shouldn't, in her place. Just go to that right-hand drawer. There's a postal order on the top. I got it for a bill from town, but that can wait. There's no hurry. You have a stamp? Capital. Now, write a little line at once and enclose it. She'll get it some time to-morrow."

"But you'll take it from my wages, mum?" Day stood her ground firmly.

"Well, we'll see." Deirdre laughed. "Off you go. I want my salad; and then you can run to the pillar box."

"You're too good, mum." Reluctantly the maid obeyed. "I oughtn't to take it. But I'll tell Lottie it's for the child, and not for that Fred—to be spent on beer!" With a flicker of temper she left the room and Deirdre caught her parting murmur: "Nothing but an empty gas-bag, full o' politics and rubbish!"

## CHAPTER XX

SUMMER lightning flickered across the evening sky. Far away a storm was brewing in the hills, but over the woods peace reigned. A golden moon, like a bright round face, stared down at the drowsy earth and was veiled at times by drifting clouds, light as gossamer, speeding past.

The dry leaves crackled beneath her feet as Deirdre trod the curving road that followed the wall of the park, shadowed by the fine old trees with their mottled burden of russet and ochre, where here and there a half-bare bough stretched eagerly over the coping like a mighty arm which stooped to catch her.

The fancy framed itself in her mind, and "Not yet!" she nodded back. "Wait till I get to the heart of the wood, then you shall whisper your latest secret!"

When she came to the painted gate, to her surprise she found it ajar. She passed through eagerly, faintly awed by the deep silence that filled the undergrowth like a presence. A dry twig snapped under her foot; the sound seemed magnified into the sharp report of a pistol, and a wood pigeon, blundering out from its sleeping place, with flapping wings, startled Deirdre for a second.

But the cool fragrance of the trees lured her on with a sense of adventure. The charm of exploring unknown ways led her into a narrow track that branched off from the main path and was carpeted with the soft dust of innumerable fallen beech-leaves.

"I mustn't get lost," she reflected, smiling, as the thought of a night spent in the woods rose to her mind and she shivered slightly, half in pleasure, half in fear. "But I want to see where this path comes out before I turn back and to feel, for a space, absorbed in the silence and the peace—what the Squire calls 'a bath for the soul!'"

A bramble caught at her fluttering skirt, and she

paused to extricate herself; then on again, stepping warily as a dip in the ground showed a moist patch where a tiny brook trickled across the narrow cutting and disappeared into a bed of flowering rush.

Here the path swerved abruptly, darker than ever. Above her head the branches met and interlaced, blotting out the pale moonlight. For a moment Deirdre hesitated.

How gloomy it looked!—like the door of a trap. Then she braced herself anew, ashamed of her sudden nervousness.

But she walked faster, feeling the weight of the forest-roof descend on her and the moist oppression in the air laden with sweet aromatic scents.

At last she came to a turn in the track that wound round an elder bush weighted down with its load of berries and, as she brushed narrowly past, her breath quickened. She felt a cold and clammy touch on her neck, where a wet leaf had trailed across it. The wood seemed full of creeping fingers!

Then with relief she realized that the trees ahead were thinning fast, laced by narrow shafts of light.

"I'm coming out." She whispered the words to still the beating of her heart. She could not have spoken them aloud in this dim land of listening trees. And suddenly she began to run, stumbling over an unseen root that tried in vain to trip her up, feeling a bough whip her arm, a bramble clutch at her flying skirts, and emerged into an open space, bathed in light, whilst overhead the great gold moon laughed down at her!

She blinked in the sudden change from the dark and shaded her eyes with her hand. Before her lay the long green ride, sloping gently to the lake that lay like a magic opal set in the dark splendour of the woods.

She could see midway the sleeping lodge, raised on piles above the grass and open on three sides to the air, with its low jutting roof of thatch.

Tired but thankful she sat down on a log that bordered the narrow path, grateful for the human touch *that* the presence of the lodge afforded. A lock of hair

had escaped from beneath her garden hat in her wild flight. She fastened it back with shaking fingers and, aware of the fact, laughed at herself.

"How absurd to be such a coward! As if the woods could possibly hurt. But they felt just a shade uncanny." She shivered at the recollection.

Slowly the beauty of the scene sank into her consciousness, soothing her instinctively.

"What a night! It's like a dream. . . ." Her eyes drank in the grassy ride narrowing up to the line of the sky in a perspective of silvery green that faded away indistinct into the deep blue of the heavens.

"How I wish that I could paint it." She began to outline the picture with a swift valuation of light and shade. "It only needs Diana now, bare-limbed, with her leashed hounds and the moon a crescent——"

She broke off, alert and startled, her ears straining.

Far away in the covert beyond silence had given place to sound; the woods were alive with secret movement: a crashing in the undergrowth—something was coming, swift and ruthless! She sprang to her feet, her pulses beating.

What could it be? A poacher, perhaps? She tried to still her rising fear, but instinctively she sought for cover and slipped behind the nearest tree, concealed by the trunk, her hands pressed against the bark, cool and rough, her eyes anxiously peering round it.

The noise increased. Now she could see something move, indistinct, in the shadows beyond the bar of light; and swiftly into the milky space a dim form leaped and stood revealed, as though suddenly turned to stone, limbs taut, head thrown up, crowned by a pair of mighty antlers.

Deirdre gave a little gasp. From some subconscious region of mind the word "Actæon" took shape. Was it a dream—a passing vision—or a living, breathing, wonderful fact?

The stag stood there, beautiful in its moment of indecision. She could see the delicate nostrils wide, as though with fear, snuffing the breeze. The moon silvered the gallant form: the slender limbs suggesting

speed, the proudly-carried noble head, with its dark muzzle and wild soft eyes.

Then, as from the wood behind, some distant sound reached its ears, the stag moved forward and swung to the left and a further marvel was revealed.

Three does stole forth, fragile and timid, obeying their lord; shadows of love, with no will but his—children of Nature's imperious law.

Some secret signal passed between them and in a flash they were off again, skimming across the moonlit space, swift and noiseless as swallows that dip and brush the meadows with their wings.

The leaves seemed to part at their touch; a faint rustle of swung-back boughs succeeded their first reckless plunge and then the wood had swallowed them up like a mother who takes her babe to her breast.

Deirdre, with shining eyes, listened and wondered.

Where had they gone? What mystery of the Autumn night had driven them forth from their hidden lair, where they lay sleeping in the bracken?

The answer was borne to her by the breeze. For the covert ahead was still full of disturbance—human this time, she conjectured. Some one was plunging through the trees, forcing a way through the lower tangle, trampling, rending, hunting the deer!

Holding her breath she stood there, waiting, trying to localize the sound. Now the intruder was coming this way. She heard the dry twigs snap and crackle, heavy feet spurning the brambles, and then a man struggled out of the leafy mass into the open.

A little cry broke from her lips.

For bare-headed, ashen-faced, the Squire stood there, as though dazed, and swept a hand across his eyes, blinded in the sudden light.

No coat covered him and his flannel shirt was ripped across at the shoulder, in a jagged rent, the bare flesh gleaming through; his shoes were deep in sticky clay and he looked in the last stage of exhaustion, wholly distraught, driven forward by some wild, impelling force.

Even as she realized this he started again at a weary

trot to cross the green belt of grass, heading straight for the narrow path by which she had come, unaware of her presence.

The spell that held her motionless snapped. Here was trouble so evident that all her heart rose in pity, stilling the tremor of her nerves. Out she stepped from her hiding-place.

She saw him check and his head go up, flung back inquiringly. It reminded her of the startled stag.

Then he cried her name aloud poignantly, "Deirdre!" and ran towards her, hands outstretched, as a child runs to those it loves in the face of some deadly peril.

"Deirdre—oh, Deirdre!" His arm were round her, his head went down helplessly upon her breast; she could hear the hard dry sobs that mark the breaking point of control in a strong man's last defences.

"Hush . . . hush." She held him close, smoothing the dark and ruffled hair, utterly self-forgetful now—convention thrown to the winds of heaven. "Oh, my dear—my *poor* Rollo!—what is wrong with you? Won't you tell me?"

But still he clung to her, past speech. She could feel him shudder, fighting—tense—to master his overpowering distress. Where the torn shirt fell away from his shoulder the thorns had pierced the flesh and a smear of blood had dried upon it. Subconsciously she noted this. It added to her love and pity.

"Rollo?" Her voice broke on the word, and as if this touched some secret chord in his being, he shifted his head slightly so that his eyes, full of pain, could meet her own downward glance. A sudden wave of telepathy swept across her. She guessed the truth.

"Not—Hyacinth?" She read the reply on his drawn and haggard face. "Dead?" Her lips shaped the word.

"No—worse!" the whisper reached her.

She started at this, horrified. Vague conjectures overwhelmed her, in which like a phantom the old dread of the riderless horse and that glimpse of romance in the silent woods rose supreme.

"Never!" Her loyalty thrust it aside.



The Squire relapsed into his old attitude, his eyes hidden, blotting out some picture that still haunted him.

"Yes—failed me"—broken speech succeeded the heavy spell of silence—"soul-less—her mother over again!"

"Hush, hush——" She held him close as a nurse shields a frightened child.

Above them a cool rising wind stirred the leaves with a fluttering sigh. The forest was round them, hemming them in—a magic circle of age and strength. It seemed to Deirdre's quickened sense that the great trees looked down, pitiful, at these frail mortals with their fugitive span of existence—their pigmy problems and endless fears and desires and barren questionings.

At last Rollo broke the spell.

"I saw them—with my own eyes—Hyacinth and Pontefract."

His speech, once loosened, the words poured out in staccato phrases, bitter, hopeless. The whole story of deception seemed like the memory of some dream that centred round a monstrous figure in Deirdre's brain—that of a centaur.

"Chris—my own intimate friend! Fool—blind fool that I've been! No wonder she was happy at Weavers. God knows when it began. I never dreamed—such treachery. Eulalie, then Hyacinth!—my life work. I *trusted* her."

On went the tragic voice: "Never, never trust a woman! They're not worth it; there's something wrong—missing. Is it the mainspring of truth?—a sense of justice? God knows. The child loved me, in her way. Fear? No, impossible! I've never hurt her in my life. Infatuation?—feminine lust—the ruthlessness of the search for a mate. . . ."

"Don't!" Deirdre, white to the lips, shrank back and away from him. "We're not like that—not all of us. It isn't true. It's . . . an insult!"

Startled, he came to his senses.

"Ah, forgive me!" He caught at her hands imploringly. "I must be mad—God knows what I'm saying! Wounding *you*, of all people! Deirdre"—he gazed at *her* with a deep and wistful tenderness—"don't turn

from me. I love you so, I couldn't bear it—not now! I've been tramping the woods for hours on end. I didn't dare speak to them. I should have killed Pontefract! Perhaps Hyacinth as well. And then when my brain seemed on fire *you* came—like a heavenly vision!—laid cool hands upon my head—sheltered me on your perfect breast. My dear—my dear . . . what you've been to me!" He saw the tears well up in her eyes. Into her face came the puzzled look of a child who sifts right from wrong, laboriously seeking the truth.

"You know I love you?" He held her now at arms' length hungrily, reading her thoughts with his sure instinct. "It can't hurt you, Deirdre. I'd never let you hurt yourself, or risk a single high ideal. For I love your soul—the *essence* of you. I've not a base thought about you! If you'd been free I'd have made you my wife; one in body as in spirit. But *now*, all that I dare ask—crumbs from the rich man's table. A perfect friendship—without fear—or shame, or any unhallowed thing."

His eyes shone with a deep light. "Do you understand? Will you trust me?"

"Yes." She caught her breath on the word. "Only . . ."

"Well?" he urged her gently. "Don't be afraid of hurting me. Tell me all your trouble, sweet."

"It's just this: Is it *right*—fair to you—to take all and give . . . nothing in return?" The colour flamed up into her face. "I'm married, Rollo. I'm not happy, but that's no excuse for breaking vows! Lonely—God knows how lonely! And—yes, I'll confess, hungry for love. To feel I've a corner in the world where one soul needs me and understands. But I can't blot out all the past and bury those 'dead yesterdays.' I can give you friendship with both my hands. But love? No, it's against my creed!"

For a moment she paused, fighting down a sharp and overwhelming temptation.

"It means misery ahead, self-reproach, broken pride. And, since you love me, is it fair? Won't it be worse for you in the end?"

"And what is the end?" A faint smile curved the tired lines of his mouth. "Death for us all, an interval, long or short, and a new life. It's only the flesh that's weak, my dear, the world's desire—the call of the body—a minor claim before the spirit! And since denial but adds to strength—the soul's strength—why should we fear? The joy and blessing of knowing you, of feeling in touch with a fellow-being, the consolation of your friendship—surely we stand on equal terms? Out of the shipwreck of my life you rise up, embodying Hope, offering all that I dare to ask—spiritual companionship."

He heard her give a little sob.

"Yes, yes, you can claim that. . . . I think there has always been a link——" Her words came out incoherently. "You stand apart: the only man—the only one who has come quite close: my own ideals—clean and true. And who understands." A tear ran down and fell between them on the grass. "If I can help, can be of use—for love is service, after all—lighten your burden, share it, dear, I will, Rollo. I promise you."

"Ah!" His hands fell away from her quivering shoulders; he stepped back. She guessed the effort that it cost him—the stern control he laid on himself. No close embrace could have told her more. It was the very essence of love. After a minute he found his voice.

"Then that's settled," he said gently. "Wonderful!" His lips twisted with a hint of the old puckish smile. "The mystery of 'compensation,' that balance of the unseen force which holds this crooked world together." His head went up with a free gesture. "I'm ashamed of myself—my lack of faith—all my philosophy wiped out by a twisted thread in my handiwork!"

She saw that his mood was changing fast, his volatile temperament responding to the reaction from the strain. She did not misjudge his attitude. This was the man: so keenly alive that his brain sought ever a way of escape from the burden of grief that threatened his heart.

He went on forcibly. "As if one could ever succeed in the end without failures to spur one forward. Now—

with you and your help and instinct—I'll unravel the knot and start afresh."

"Yes"—she looked up eagerly—"I think I *can* be of use, if it's only on account of my sex. A woman understands a woman. But Hyacinth is still a child—in many ways. It's not too late. I should like to think it all through quietly. Will you take me home? Day will be getting so anxious. We can talk as we go along. And perhaps you could come and see me to-morrow, early?"

The Squire actually laughed.

"I'll come to breakfast, if I may!" They turned and set out down the glade side by side, keeping step, and he went on evolving his plan. "I shall sleep here in the woods. Nobody knows I'm back in Weavers. I shall make an official appearance to-morrow and send to the station for my luggage, about twelve o'clock, I think. That will give us time for a chat!" He slipped a hand through her arm. "Look out for rabbit holes; the grass here is full of them. Why, you're only in slippers, dear! Now, isn't that feminine perversity?"

"I didn't mean to come so far, but I felt a hankering for the woods, and was punished by nearly losing my way, until I stumbled on to the ride."

She told him of her evening's adventure, glad to draw his mind away for a space from his heavy worries, feeling the old happy charm of the quick thought that met her own, challenged it or sympathized, and his interest in all her doings.

They emerged at last on the curving track beneath the long line of wall, and the "sentinel tree" beside the gate recalled a fact to Deirdre.

"I shall not tell him yet," she decided, "about the horse I found tethered there. To think it was Hyacinth all the time!" Her face shadowed at the thought. "And Chris—the centaur. . . ."

The Squire's voice broke the thread of her self-communing.

"I came across a little volume of modern verse the other day with one perfect woodland scene. I wish I could remember half. It's a long poem"—he paused to think—"there's only the ending that's still in my mind. It's

something like this." His brows were knit in the effort of memory.

Then in his deep and rhythmical voice he began to quote lovingly from Wilfred Thorley's "Dead Dryad":

"She will train no more on the slender trellis  
The vine to cling nor the rose to climb,  
The red-lipped rosebuds, whose holy smell is  
As kisses crushed on the mouth of Time  
To ransom Beauty. Her skin sublime  
Was tameless love of the world she filled,  
With lips alert for life's brimming chalice  
Or taut with grief for the wine she spilled.

"She will fly no more from the rampant legions  
Of centaurs ranked, nor the lewd faun's lure;  
Nor her soft mouth pant in the pathless regions  
Where life is safe and where love is sure;  
Nor twine the reed with her fingers pure;  
Nor draw warm milk from the wild goat's teat.  
And happy I were my fate to follow  
And lay my head on her dear dead feet!"

He glanced sideways at Deirdre's face, satisfied by her warm silence.

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## CHAPTER XXI

DEIRDRE stood in the tower-room gazing out of the corner window. Now and again she would glance at the clock anxiously; then her eyes would turn to the narrow lane past Brewer's Farm, where the thinning trees afforded a vista beyond between bronzed leaves and sombre branches.

Where was the Squire? What had happened? She had breakfasted an hour since, weary of waiting for the guest, and now, as the hands crept slowly round on the brass dial, every tick of the deep-swung pendulum seemed to hold a note of disaster.

Sleep had deserted her through the night. Under the stimulus of excitement her brain had worked with that razor-like edge of keenness which follows overwrought nerves. Scene after scene passed before her. In vain she had tried to analyse the part she had played in them herself and her own feelings towards Mesurier.

A stray phrase of Mrs. Thursby's haunted her persistently.

"You can't have a woman balanced between a husband and a would-be lover!"

Too honest to evade the issue and supplement the word by "friend," Deirdre had stared blankly into the darkness, wondering. . . .

But since Mark had emphasised openly his desire to be free— Here she paused, checked again by an insidious throb of conscience.

Had he? Was it merely a phase of uncontrolled and childish temper? Why did he still seek her out—urgently hint at her return?

What a puzzle life was!

Did he—could he—love her still? Or was it the outcome of a man's instinctive dislike for a public scandal, mixed with a sentiment of discomfort caused by the absence of the mistress to control the domestic machinery?

And what about her own heart? Where did it lie? In the dark she flushed. The memory of that moonlit glade; of the Squire, broken, in her arms: the perilous sweetness of his words, the gift of love he had offered her, above all the swift response that had risen in her own breast and bridged the gulf of loneliness—swept back like a revelation.

Was this love—an Autumn passion? The last revolt of her womanhood?

It poured over her again—the wonder and secret exultation—with a force which almost frightened her as she stood staring down the lane.

"It's more than friendship." She whispered the words. "But I can't analyse it yet. I daren't! I don't believe it's wrong—not on the lines that he proposed. And it's heavenly to feel wanted, a comfort to a human being, to be in touch mentally—'spiritual companionship.'"

She pressed her hands to her hot cheeks and again her thoughts turned to Mark. For the first time for many months she could study his conduct without rancour. For her pride, broken by neglect, had returned to her whole through a man's respect.

An almost maternal solicitude had replaced the old wifely instinct. Mark seemed to her like some thwarted child whose own waywardness marred his life; at the mercy of his gusts of temper, seeking to cast the blame on others.

Her intimate sense of failure faded. No mortal woman could make him happy—contented for long! It was his nature; claiming all, yet giving nothing. Like the proverbial Irishman he did not know for what he sought, yet could not be soothed until he got it! Ever a materialist, he lived for the moment's fleeting pleasure, and, with few resources in himself, was dogged by the phantom, satiety. Perhaps now he needed her from the very fact that she had left him—was out of reach, unattainable! It spurred anew his jaded senses.

She shivered as though a cold wind had blown across the open country.

Far away, over the hill came the rasping note of a

motor horn. She leaned out through the narrow casement, listening. Was that Mesurier's car?

Below her a playful, eddying breeze blew the leaves into a whirlwind—round and around, a breathless dance—at the junction of the four roads.

Then, as her eyes swept the slope, she saw a streak of yellow gleam and the sunlight flash on metal fittings.

On came the powerful car, swift and noiseless, spurning up behind it a cloud of silver dust. It was steered by the Squire himself. It slackened speed beneath her window. Mesurier glanced up and waved, his face serious but composed. She heard the heavy brakes grind, and ran downstairs to open the door.

"Well?" He surged through the opening. "Did you think me lost?" He clasped her hand. "I'm awfully sorry, Deirdre, but I couldn't help it. I'll explain. First, though, how are you? How did you sleep?" He studied her face.

"Pretty well," she smiled back. "I was getting rather worried about you."

"I know." He drew a chair forward. "Sit there, where I can see you. How sweet you look, and cool and fresh—manna in the wilderness!"

"But what's happened?" Her colour rose under his tender scrutiny. "I thought you were coming here to breakfast."

"So I was—worse luck! I mean," he smiled, "to be cheated like this. A case of the 'plans of mice and men.' Hyacinth came down to bathe and caught me. I hadn't thought of that."

"Nor I—this weather!" She stared at him. "Oh, Rollo, *what* a pity!"

"I don't know. It had to be, sooner or later. I'm glad now that I've got it over. Of course I cleared the ground at once. I don't believe in evading issues. We fought it out then and there."

"How did she take it?" Her voice was tense.

"Quite calmly, to my surprise. Honestly, too, God be praised! She bowled me over from the start by saying she 'was glad I knew'! I never realised before what



an amazing child it was!—the mixture of innocence and folly, ignorance and trained logic.

"But she wouldn't admit that it was wrong. She dismisses that as 'conventional.' Her point of view is: she loves Chris and he loves her and they're both happy! And since nobody else is hurt (according to her) it's pure gain.

"She quoted my own words against me with deadly precision"—he smiled grimly—"my theory that the happiness of the individual brightens the world. Marriage holds no appeal to her—they're 'superior to legal bonds'—so she blots out that phantom wife with a hearty dislike for the tax on Chris! She seems to believe that this state of things can exist unto eternity: stolen meetings, and lovers' notes hidden in holes in the trees! She said with a perfectly charming air of indifference that she realised we were 'not at all like other people'—she and I—'a race apart.' That we made our own laws and acted on them, undeterred by convention. I countered here by asking her, if this were true, why wasn't I told?"

"Well?" Deirdre leaned across the narrow table, her face eager.

"My dear, she floored me utterly! Slipped an arm around my neck and said in her most caressing voice, 'I was so afraid that you'd be jealous'!

"What stunned me in it was the truth. I have been jealous—horribly! To think that a casual beggar like Chris could steal my child away from me, when for all these years I'd been—well, *more* than a parent—her dearest pal. Quite apart from a question of ethics it stung my pride. I'll admit it. It's such damned impertinence!"

Deirdre smiled. The Squire looked so boyishly ashamed of himself, yet aggressive, too. He went on before she could ask a further question:

"I tried to point out logically how impossible the whole thing was. Hyacinth sat there and smiled and dried her hair in the sunshine. We'd met in the middle of the lake—a most unlucky *contretemps*. I heard a splash and came swimming back round the island just

in time to see her come up from her first dive. There we were, facing each other. You can't be dignified out of your depths!"

He laughed, caught by the humour of it, to Deirdre's secret surprise, and, reading her thought, steadied his face. "I can't help it—the *relief*! Don't you understand, my dear? She's innocent—such a child still—just a victim of Romance!

"Of course it's highly perilous, this playing with fire, but not so black a disaster as it might have been; certainly not too late to save her. Time and absence may work marvels; fresh scenes, new faces. The slightly banal attractions of Chris must stand the test of comparison. Other men—other methods.

"It wrecks my theory—entirely." He seemed now to be thinking aloud rather than addressing her. "This isolation was all wrong. Youth cries aloud to youth. Nature pulls the hidden strings—sex-attraction, the mating instinct.

"I must get her away out of Weavers—into a totally different life. *Ay de mi!* It will be a wrench—that closed-in house in Deanery Street."

He raised his head with a little start as though he faced the practical needs.

"I'm going to make her a gift of it. It would have been hers after my death. But I think if she's mistress of it *now* it will add to her sense of dignity. It's a lucky thing it's almost ready—a new interest in life. She can hunt about in the old shops and replace most of the modern sticks. And then, of course, she must entertain, go to dances, be presented. *Won't* Louisa be delighted?" His mouth curled in disgust. "She'll think I've taken her advice and rub it in each time we meet!"

His thoughts reverted to the cause for this upheaval in his life.

"I've not had it out with Chris. I motored over, tried to catch him, but he'd gone to town by the early train. That's why I was so late. I guessed somehow you'd understand." She nodded her head and he went on:

"It means a journey to Dieppe. It's no use my writing letters—with the chance of 'our dear Mrs. Chris' steaming them open. I must see him."

"Yes." Deirdre's face was grave. "It would be fatal—any scandal. For Hyacinth's sake, especially. Besides, you must stop this at the source. Mr. Pontefract——" She paused, biting her lip. "I won't say it. But there's no earthly excuse for him. He doesn't suffer from—innocence!"

Mesurier's firm mouth hardened.

"Not exactly." His voice was grim.

"Did you make her promise not to see him?"

"No. I don't believe in a vow extorted under undue pressure. I told her that I trusted her. It's always been my way with the child. And that if she loved me she would try and meet my wishes for a time. We're still comrades, thank God! But I did beg her not to write—for her own sake—too dangerous. To my surprise she promised this. She was really awfully sweet to me—tempered the wind to the shorn sheep." His puckish smile flickered out. "I could see she rather pitied me for my hidden streak of respectability; became motherly, in fact, stroked my head and said, 'Poor Rollo! Am I really weak? I'm wondering.'"

"A little." Deirdre dared the answer. "But you understand Hyacinth. And I *know* she's truly devoted to you."

A short silence fell between them. The Squire was playing with a flower in the blue bowl on the table, absently rearranging it. He seemed to be questioning himself.

Deirdre watched him thoughtfully, her own face a shade wistful.

"So you're both going to desert Weavers? How empty the place will seem without you!"

Her dream had been shattered in the night—the guardianship of the girl she loved and the old happy gipsy life. Flown with the Summer! Now cold winds and empty days lay before her: her one true "friend" snatched away; this time she used the word firmly, feeling that love was not for her.

Mesurier twisted in his chair.

"I don't know—I'm torn asunder. It lies a good deal in your hands."

"How?" Her voice was indistinct.

The Squire bent across the table.

"Such little hands! 'Ladies' fingers'—you know that perfect little flower?" He took them gently in his own and she did not resist. She felt too hopeless. He went on, under his breath.

"And yet—they hold my whole life. Deirdre, are you going to help me? Dare I ask such a sacrifice?"

A glimmer of his meaning reached her.

"You mean," she stammered, "with Hyacinth? . . . Not in town?"

He nodded his head.

A sudden revulsion of feeling shook her.

"And leave Weavers—Four Corners? Go back—to the old life?"

"*Never!*" he broke in vigorously. "A new one, for a short time, with Hyacinth—nothing more. To watch over her first steps—play the part of elder sister."

"'Mother,' you mean," she smiled faintly.

"Good God, I wish you were!" His sudden vehemence startled her. "What a waste—a woman like you! Made to hold warm babes to your breast, and to be the joy and delight of a man—his whole content and hope of Heaven. Deirdre, oh, *Deirdre!*" He caught her hand up to his lips, then laid it a moment against his brow. "Sorry! Forgive me—I couldn't help it!" His voice was husky. "I won't forget. I'm going to be true to our compact. I swear you shall never have cause for regret."

"I know . . . I trust you." Her eyes shone. They revealed far more than she imagined. For a moment he drank deep of the love and faith in their limpid, violet depths.

"Dear eyes." He drew back and straightened his shoulders with a sigh.

"There—I'm a good boy again. Now, Deirdre, let's talk sense."

"Thank you!" She gave a happy laugh that was

meant to be light but was tremulous. "Tell me honestly what you think. Don't try to wrap it up."

"No, it's this. Could you see your way—for a month—six weeks—to come to town and chaperon Hyacinth—break her into London ways? By the end of that time the Byngs will be back in Charles Street. Parliament opens. Of course I shall run up and down myself. I've thought it out. I shan't live there; that is, in Deanery Street. I shall take bachelor chambers near."

"But wouldn't people think it strange? That you didn't live with your only daughter?"

The Squire chuckled.

"Let them think! It's the lesser of two possible evils. And then I'm known to be 'eccentric.' Here's the latest phase of it! If you want to lead your own life it's a great pull, between ourselves, to be considered slightly mad. It's a passport to liberty. Apart from you—and, of course, you'll guess you've a certain share in this arrangement—I think it's better for Hyacinth. It will show her the faith I have in her. This season in town must be for pleasure, in no sense a punishment! Banished from Weavers in disgrace? It would drive her straight to her lover's arms!"

"Yes, of course; you're right there. But I don't know—it's difficult." She was turning it over in her mind. Mark loomed so big in London. Well, it would snap the last link. He would *have* to understand this way. Perhaps . . .

The Squire broke in on her thoughts with unconcealed eagerness.

"I shall see you often. I shan't lose you. It won't be the same setting, of course, not the freedom of the dear old woods. But we'll steal a few truant hours out of the crowd and the breathless air; motor into the silent country, open spaces, and wind-swept hills. Do you know the valley of the Thames? It's beautiful. And, look here, we'll bicycle in Battersea Park, and I'll row you on the Serpentine!" His laugh rang through the low-roofed room. "That's the notion! You and I—outwardly smug citizens—meeting at parties: best clothes, 'lip-talk'—d'you know what I mean? The sort that

never comes from the brain, but is born somewhere behind the teeth!

"And then, hey, presto!—the good old car. Goggles, cloaks, a villain's disguise, and the *real* people that we are emerging out of our pretences. Why, my dear—it's a Great Adventure! I hadn't thought of it like that. Penance? Not a bit of it! The pair of us making fun of the world!"

"And Hyacinth?" she suggested softly.

"Why, of course, she'll simply love it! We'll get old Chris to make a fourth. Good Lord!" He stopped agast, suddenly faced with the cruel fact.

Words failed Deirdre. She saw him turn abruptly away and cross to the window, staring out with blind eyes into the garden.

"Rollo." She stole up behind him. "*Don't* fret—it's no good. It will all come right in the end. I *know* it will! The child loves you."

Still he made no sign or sound. She slipped a hand through his arm and went on in her tender voice:

"It's cruel, dear—the treachery! I understand. But it's . . . just life, a turn of the wheel. What did you say, last night"—she was whispering now—"about Nature's compensations? We must take the rough as well as the smooth. And if I can help, I will, Rollo. Between us——"

He swung round.

"You mean that?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Coming—to town?" His face was white.

"For as long as you want me."

Unashamed, he brushed his hand across his eyes.

"Why, my sweet, that's Eternity."

She smiled at him, strangely content.

## CHAPTER XXII

"WHAT are you doing, Deirdre?"

"Shampooing the palm," came a laughing voice from the floor below. "Do you want me, dear?"

"Just for a minute." Hyacinth leaned over the narrow banisters. "It's hats again—and I *can't* choose! There's that brown one I loved at the shop, but here I look like a pig in a poke! Oh, what a nuisance one's clothes are!"

Deirdre laid down her sponge and saucer beside the bottle of "palm oil" and ran lightly up the stairs to the girl's bedroom over the drawing-room. Her own lay just behind it, and beyond where the house jutted out were a bathroom and a narrow cabin in which Day fitted tightly.

The "doll's house in Deanery Street," as Hyacinth called it, was still a toy to its young mistress, although she missed the spacious rooms at the Hall.

She stood before the three-fold mirror, a frown upon her pretty face, trying to fit a velvet toque over the masses of her hair.

"It's too small"—her voice was hopeless—"or, perhaps I'm suffering from swollen head?" She tore it off dramatically, as Deirdre peered over her shoulder. "*You* put it on. Why, you look a dream! That's a mercy—it's found its owner. Now, Deirdre, don't be pr-r-roud! I want you to have it. *Please* do."

The beautiful green-blue eyes were full of a wistful and caressing light.

"You never let me give you things, so just this once be generous! Yes, that's the right word—with an obstinate darling like yourself! If not, I'll give it to Lisette, and that will be 'throwing money away.'" She was laughing now, as she quoted a phrase familiar during the past month.

Both Mesurier and his daughter had a hearty con-

tempt for money *per se*. They indulged in the fancy of the moment to an extent that worried Deirdre.

"I think we ought to send it back. I'm sure they'd exchange it for another." But she gave a sidelong look at the glass, aware that the dark folds of velvet brought out the clearness of her skin and the red gleams in her glossy hair.

"No, it's settled. You, or Lisette! Now, look here. Isn't this fun?" She gathered up a wide-brimmed hat that lay on the lace counterpane and was turned up at a sharp angle. "You see, if I tilt it up this way, on one side is Hyacinth, on the other just the tip of her chin. When I meet people I want to avoid it becomes my 'perfect shield and buckler.' To those I love I offer a view of my profile, like an embossed coin! Oh, dear, I'm so tired."

She flung herself down in the arm-chair and pressed a delicate hand to her brow.

"Headache?" Deirdre glanced at her anxiously.

"Nothing much! Just town—the noise and fuss. How I wish I were back at Weavers!"

A ring of pain was in her voice.

"Poor little girl! I'm *so* sorry." Deirdre knelt down beside her, slipping an arm round her waist. "Never mind—it's not for long."

The head with its heavy burden of hair drooped lower; now it lay wearily on Deirdre's shoulder. There were violet shadows under the eyes, shaded by the full white lids with their gold-tipped fringe of darker lashes.

A muffled voice came up to her friend. "Chris . . . I do miss him so. I think Rollo's simply cruel! He's always pretended to be above all the stupid old conventions—that the great thing was to be free and happy and fulfil oneself, untrammelled by social laws. And now at the first hitch he recants. I don't see the sense of it! We shall always, always love each other. And life's so short, why waste the days? Hats?—futile. Who wants hats?"

Deirdre smiled at this anti-climax. "I do—that velvet toque! I think you're a dear to give it me. And, Hyacinth, remember this: Faith can be only measured



by tests. A love that can't survive absence——" She broke off, conscious here that she was taking the wrong line, and went on hurriedly: "In any case, you must play fair. Chris belongs to another woman."

"He doesn't." Hyacinth drew herself up, her face flushed and indignant. "She cheated from the very start. No, he never let it out, but Rollo did; I know it's true. He only became engaged to her to get her out of a silly mess—a practical joke at the Grange that scandalised the old brewer. And then she held Chris to it. That little beast, Mrs. Gage, helped. It was planned between them. He was *trapped*! And if you call that true marriage"—she threw out her hands with a scornful gesture—"I'd sooner live and die single. Love is superior to the law!"

"And what about honour?" Deirdre spoke in her gentlest voice. "The Mesuriers have always placed that rather high, haven't they, Hyacinth?"

The girl winced.

"I don't know—I don't care! Rollo and I are different." She bit her lip. "What's the good of all our talks about liberty of thought and action and 'happiness as a real force,' if now, when I want desperately to be happy, in my own way, Rollo says: 'It won't do. The world would condemn you utterly!' *That* for the world!" She snapped her fingers. "As if it lived in Weavers woods! Nobody knew—nobody cared. It was our secret utterly."

"A secret that was bound to slip, sooner or later. I knew." Hyacinth gave a little start, but Deirdre went on steadily. "That is, about Chris. I found his horse beyond the gate tethered to the big tree, and I heard voices in the wood, caught a glimpse of you both one night. But, although I wondered, later on when I really got to know you, child, I thought it was impossible, that it must have been—some village girl."

"But if you saw us in the woods—saw *me*?" Her breath quickened with excitement and discomfort.

"I didn't look," said Deirdre simply. "It wasn't any affair of mine—a lovers' meeting. I ran away. I couldn't stay and spy upon them."

"Oh, you *darling!*" The girl hugged her in her sudden deep relief. "Isn't it like you—such a sportsman! Chris always said you were. Well"—she stretched her slender arms above her head with a fanciful yawn which broke off sharply in a sigh—"I've promised Rollo not to write until Christmas—not a line! To go through this social farce: buy hats that I can't wear"—a smile curved her full lips; the reaction of youth was setting in—"and prance about in high heels on hard pavements, bow and smile and be as Aunt Byng-ish as I can!—mercifully without her figure! There's the telephone! Shall I go?"

"No; you sit there and rest." Deirdre rose and ran downstairs over the soft luxurious carpets.

"Yes?" she picked up the receiver.

"Is that Mrs. Caradoc?" Mesurier spoke in a formal voice.

"No, it's Deirdre!" she laughed. "Good morning. So you're in town?"

"Hullo! How are you? I came up last night and resisted a strong temptation to call and lure you out for a midnight stroll. I wonder—can I come to lunch and bring a couple of men to-day? I want Hyacinth to know them—Lord Courthorpe, a college friend, and his nephew, Reggie Bolsover. He's a nice fresh soldier-boy, keen on dancing—quite young. It doesn't matter if you're busy—or the veal cutlets won't go round! You see I know all about it." She heard him chuckle happily. "But, anyhow, I'm coming myself, if it's only to pick a bone with you—a veal bone, not a quarrel!" He lowered his voice. "I *must* see you."

"You shall. Will lunch at two suit you?" She glanced up at the clock. "And, of course, bring the soldier-boy, and his uncle to flirt with the chaperon!" She added in a cautious whisper: "A good thing—the child's brooding. I'll tell you all when we meet. How's Weavers?—the water-garden?"

"Ripping. I've finished the last bridge. And I've sent a lot of herbaceous plants with Second-Best to Four Corners and told him to plant them along the hedge in the orchard—make a border there. All the nice old-

fashioned plants, Foxgloves, Canterbury Bells, Larkspur. It faces south and is out of the reach of Nebuchadnezzar! It will cultivate his artistic taste. He's already a trifle like Bernard Shaw!"

"How dare you trespass on my estate?"

"Ha, ha! I'm ground-landlord. I can't see it going to rack and ruin! Tell me, before they cut us off, would you like a 'Dorothy Perkins' trained against the porch of the garden? There's a clematis on one side, a purple one, needs cutting back, but the other wall's quite bare, and oh, of course, I forgot to tell you, I'm having a seat built inside where we can sit on summer evenings. The sort that goes with a church-warden pipe, an oak settle with panelled back. It wanted that, it looked so lonely! And Higgs has been clamouring for a job, whilst Best—the original Elijah—has been pestering me for 'rustic seats.' You know those gnarled monstrosities that pierce your ribs when you lean back? So I balanced matters between the pair—who had laid their hoary heads together——"

There came an ominous blank on the wire.

"Hullo!" Deirdre called, impatiently.

"Number, please?" A woman's voice, dull and indifferent, answered her.

"You've rung us off!" She replaced the receiver with the usual virtuous indignation.

Hyacinth had entered the room.

"Is that Ralph?" she asked smiling. "He's coming to take me to the Zoo this afternoon at three o'clock. I had a line from him just now. And he wants us to fix a day to go to Chatham and see his new ship. I thought, perhaps, he was breaking the news."

"No, that was your father speaking. He'll be here to lunch with two friends. Would you like to walk across to Harrods' and bring back some flowers for the table? The ones from Weavers are all faded."

Hyacinth considered it.

"With Olga as chaperon? Do you think that's quite sufficient?" The mischievous smile on her pretty face vaguely annoyed Deirdre.

"Silly child! What next?"

"Ah . . . I wonder." The girl turned slowly away, then glanced back. "Who are these 'friends' coming to lunch? Men, I suppose!" Her voice was scornful.

"Yes." Deirdre relented. She followed the slim upright figure and intercepted her on the stairs.

"Sweetheart, you're vexed with me. What have I done? Won't you tell me?"

"Nothing. Only—I'm not a child! D'you think that I can't understand? If some one bribed you to go away and forget Weavers, and me, and Rollo, and expected you to be humbly grateful in return for a new circle of friends——" She broke off incoherently. "I feel as if every one conspired to make me utterly disloyal!"

Deirdre smiled rather sadly.

"You think your father would wish that? Has he *ever* deceived you in any way?"

"No." Hyacinth flushed at her thoughts.

"Then why should he play the hypocrite now? If anything he's been too candid! All he asks is that you should see another side of life for a time—the social side. You may despise it, but it adds to your experience. Rollo hates it, but all the same he's passed through it in his youth and he thinks it's wise now for you—a part of your worldly education. Can't you meet him half-way, cheerfully, with an equal courage? He's not in town for his *own* pleasure. I suppose you will admit that?"

To her amazement Hyacinth laughed.

Then with a spontaneous gesture she stooped and kissed the elder woman, standing on the step below.

"I love to hear you stick up for him! You're so loyal." She raised her head with a proud little gesture. "So am I. Would you like me to wear my new dress?"

"I would." Deirdre recognised the motive underlying the speech. It was a concession to social duty—no girlish impulse of vanity. "Now, I must go and worry Cook. Lunch isn't till two o'clock, so you'll have time for a nice walk."

"And come home with a fine colour?" The blue-green

eyes were mischievous. She leaned down over the banisters, laughing, and fired a parting shot:

"Then Rollo will remark how well you're looking after me!"

She was off with a quick, childish skip, calling loudly for Lisette.

Deirdre stood for a moment, thoughtful. At times the insidious notion rankled that Hyacinth had guessed the truth. For Love is a powerful teacher. He has a "wireless" of his own, which intercepts calls outside the radius of the pair involved.

Did she guess how matters lay between her father and her friend, but miss the fundamental basis? Deirdre's cheek burned at the thought. Then determinedly she drove the unpleasant theory out of her mind and turned to her domestic duties—the revision of their simple lunch.

The cook was in a bad temper. Late head kitchen-maid at the Hall, and alive to her new dignity, she conceived it due to herself to inveigh against the smallness of the kitchen.

"I'll do my best, mum"—she looked resigned—"but the places here is *not* handy. And as to the larder, 'ow anything *keeps*—to say nothing of the mice!"

"We must ask the Squire for a cat." Deirdre ignored the rest, and the cook, aware of this, bridled.

"A cat won't eat black beetles, mum. If I'd have known what a small house I were coming to——"

Deirdre checked her.

"I see. You would rather be at Weavers, under Mrs. Mason again?"

"Indeed, no!" She tossed her head. "There's plenty of places in London, mum. I 'ad a letter yesterday asking if I'd like a change."

"Well, if you do, it's quite simple. We must try Mary—she wants to come, and she's so fond of Miss Mesurier." Deirdre smiled in her sleeve.

"You wouldn't care for her cooking, mum. She's a heavy hand with the pastry. And I'm sure I've tried to suit you, mum." Injured pride was in her voice.

Deirdre turned at the kitchen door.

"I've never complained, have I, Kate? But I shouldn't at all like you to stay, if you really felt unhappy here. All the same we should miss your cakes, so think it over. It's better for you to earn a character as cook than to go now with only a letter from the housekeeper at the Hall, where you had no responsibility. I've ordered an ice by telephone. Have you wafers in the house?"

"Yes'm"—the cook smiled nervously—"I've everything." She twisted her apron in her hands. "I'm sure I'd be sorry to leave myself, after my long service and all! P'raps, mum, you'd kindly say nothing just yet to Miss Hyacinth, so long as I gives satisfaction." She drew a deep-bosomed sigh.

"Well, think it over," Deirdre nodded. "It's just as well to be quite sure. I shall keep what you've said to myself. Don't forget cream in the spinach."

She mounted the stairs wearily, impatient at the contretemps.

"That's over, *pro tem*. I've felt it coming for a week. The London taint creeping in and capturing the country mind. A desire for change—fresh excitement—it's the disease of the age. Oh, for my dear Four Corners with the trusty Day and a quiet life!"

But a further trial was in store. She had just completed a hasty toilette and seated herself at the writing-table beneath the window, where double panes shut out the noise of the narrow street, when the drawing-room door was thrown wide and Charles announced "Mrs. Thursby."

Deirdre rose with a little gasp. Her mother, stepping gingerly, as though upon unhallowed ground, advanced, elegant and frigid.

"Yes. I expect you're surprised. But I thought it my duty to come and see you. I am merely in town for the day. This was the only possible hour."

She submitted to Deirdre's nervous embrace and cast a shrewd glance round the room.

The luxury of its appointments drove her by a swift recoil to a hard chair with a straight back.

"Thanks. I prefer a high seat. I can talk better." Deirdre's heart sank down lower still.

"You're looking very well," she began. But her mother waved the topic aside.

"I am not here to discuss my health—my unfortunate health—but your conduct." She gave a faint ominous sniff and drew a lace-edged handkerchief out of her little silk hand-bag.

"Now," thought Deirdre helplessly, "she will wave that about, take off her gloves, shew her rings, and eventually cry." Out aloud she said calmly: "I don't know what you mean by my conduct. I explained to you in my last letter I was chaperoning Miss Mesurier."

Mrs. Thursby raised her veil and began to unbutton her dove-coloured gloves.

"Explained!" she scoffed. "You never answered a single question that I asked, although you knew how anxious I was. And how you can treat your mother like this, who has lived for you . . . worked for you"—she straightened the beautiful rings on her hand and gathered up the scrap of lawn—"is beyond all human understanding. You're breaking my heart, Deirdre, by your neglect and wilfulness"—dab, dab at the bright, dry eyes—"I never dreamed that a child of mine could forget—all duty—and decent feeling!"

Deirdre looked annoyed.

"I really don't understand you, Mamma. If you refer to my visit to town, it surely is my own affair. The Mesuriers are nice people and Hyacinth is my great friend. If she likes to have me here with her, why should *you* object to it?"

Mrs. Thursby's eyes flashed.

"I do object—emphatically! It's scandalous—nothing less. Your place is by your husband's side; and if you choose to let a man—another man—come between you, you will have to bear the consequences. I shall not interfere."

"I hope not." Deirdre rose. She stood now before her mother, forcing her to meet her glance.

"Before you make such accusations you ought to be certain of your facts. This house is Hyacinth's alone; Mr. Mesurier does not live here. But quite apart from all this—disgusting gossip, I think it is wise for you to

know that I do not intend to return to Mark, now or later."

"You mean . . . ?" Curiosity strove with the elder woman's sense of dismay.

"What I say. For many years you have regretted—openly—all the facts of my marriage, have called me 'weak,' 'lacking in spirit,' and counselled me to rebel. Now that I take your advice, you impute the most unworthy motives. Before I ever met the Mesuriers I had left Mark—it is nothing new. Cousin Maddie gave me my chance and Mark was willing to let me go.

"Perhaps he has not told you this? I mean when you stayed with him in town, during my absence, without my knowledge, and offered to make peace between us."

"It was my duty," said Mrs. Thursby. She hid behind her handkerchief and produced a fairly successful sob. "To think you can treat me in this way! Your poor father would turn in his grave!"

The words rose to Deirdre's lips: "I'm glad you still remember him!" but she choked them back desperately. Mrs. Thursby's widowhood had been centred largely round her "weeds": the exact depth of crape required and the length of her rosary of jet. She had certainly missed the flattery of the kind old man's unfaltering worship and 'felt to the full the limitations a definite income imposed on her purse; but with it was mixed a certain relief—that of absolute independence. Yet, in a sense, she had remained faithful to the dead man. She did not belong to the class of women who find life impossible without the presence of a mate. Her refinement prohibited re-marriage at an age when passion is deemed by the world to be either ridiculous or repugnant.

Deirdre, recalling this fact and the sorrow of her father's death, felt its softening influence. After all, he had loved her mother, spared her much, lived for her smile. She knew that if he were present now he would check his daughter loyally, yet convey by a look or a quiet word his secret sympathy with justice.

More than once in his latter years he had prayed



that Deirdre might prove a comfort to her mother when old, adding with his merry twinkle: "You must let her have her own way—she always knows what she wants!"

Ah! that dear loving face, with the keen-witted humorous eyes. . . .

Deirdre, her sight blurred, knelt down by her mother's side, obeying the impulse of the moment.

"*Can't* you believe in me?" she pleaded. "I don't want to be hard, Mamma, but you do imagine such dreadful things! And I'm not a child—I'm a middle-aged woman with a full and bitter experience.

"I've tried my best, *honestly*, for years to be a good wife. I've gone through endless trouble. Mark's temper—well—you know! And now that I'm getting on in life he's tired of me—I'm no further use! He told me plainly I might go, that he regretted his bachelor days. *You're* proud—could you stand it? Do you really wish me to return to that old life of daily strain, recrimination and neglect?"

Mrs. Thursby hesitated. She was inwardly attached to her children, but for many years the love of ruling had warped her broader sense of justice.

"I think I should have been consulted. It's not a question for you to decide without the advice of your elders. And if you really cared for your mother you would turn to her in a crisis like this. But you've always thrust me away from you. Independence has been your ruin! I don't complain." A genuine sob of self-pity broke from her lips. "I'm accustomed now to live alone—neglected by my only daughter!"

Deirdre's moment of sympathy passed. She let her mother's delicate hand fall back into her lap.

"Would you like me to come and live with you?"

Mrs. Thursby, nonplussed by this most inconvenient question, evaded it with fresh tears.

"I ask no favours—it's not my way. I've borne my cross alone for years. And it won't be long now, Deirdre, before I rejoin your dear father. *Then*, perhaps, you will miss your mother and realise what you have lost. . . ." She peered out over her handkerchief

at her daughter's troubled countenance. "But, of course, you cannot understand—you've *never* been a mother yourself!"

The refined cruelty of the speech, with its faint suspicion of womanly triumph achieved its object.

Deirdre rose and stood erect by the writing table. She realised the gulf that lay between her soul and that of the woman who had borne her and—aware of the stab—could twit her offspring with being childless!

Silence hung upon the room. It was broken by the chime of the clock.

Slowly Deirdre turned round. Mrs. Thursby was fidgeting, aware that she had gone too far.

"It's getting late." She half rose.

"I hope you will stay to lunch with us"—her daughter spoke with cold politeness—"and meet the Mesuriers. Perhaps then you will understand the situation more clearly. The Squire is up in town to-day and is coming here with two of his friends. He doesn't often desert Weavers, so it seems an opportunity."

"I don't *think* I can spare the time." Mrs. Thursby temporized.

"You will have to lunch somewhere, mother"—Deirdre smiled faintly—"before you go on for your shopping. Ah, here comes Hyacinth!"

The visitor hurriedly lowered her veil as the door opened. She was swayed by conflicting desires: to effect a retreat, dignified and sorrowful, or to stay and satisfy to the full her overwhelming curiosity.

She decided upon the latter course. It was her "duty" to know these people with whom her daughter's life was involved. Economy and a good lunch helped to balance the swinging scales.

"This is my mother," said Deirdre.

Hyacinth smiled prettily, advancing with an outstretched hand.

"How nice! I wanted to meet you. Deirdre has often talked of you and her brother, whom Ralph knows. I've just been out across the Park, taking Olga for a walk." She slipped a hand through the dog's collar.

"Give the lady a paw," she ordered.

Mrs. Thursby graciously patted the beautiful Borzoi's head. Inwardly she was taken aback by this simple and hearty reception. She saw that the girl was well-bred and her grace and freshness brought a note of youthful innocence into the house.

They chatted for a few minutes, then the visitor rose to her feet.

"I'm afraid I must go." She drew herself up, elegant in her dove-grey gown, with her faded good looks and that subtle air of expecting attention and flattery which a sheltered life so often brings.

Hyacinth expostulated.

"Oh, can't you stay and lunch with us? Rollo's coming; he'd like to meet you. Unless you have another engagement?"

"No—only a round of shopping. If you wouldn't mind my slipping away *directly* after, I'm sorely tempted."

"Then that's settled," Hyacinth smiled. "I'm just going to arrange these flowers. I hope they'll do?" She turned to Deirdre: "They're all I could get, darling."

Mrs. Thursby noted the look that accompanied the caressing word. "They seem fond of one another," she thought as the girl ran off.

"Would you like to come up to my room and take off your veil?" Deirdre asked.

"Please." She wanted to see the house, and her quick eyes were darting about as she followed her daughter up the stairs.

"How pretty your chintzes are!" she glanced round approvingly. "You seem to be comfortable here."

"Quite—though the rooms are rather small. I miss the outdoor life at Weavers. We have this floor to ourselves: just Hyacinth's room in front; a bathroom and a cupboard for Day."

"Oh! *She's* with you? As your maid?"

"Yes." There came a tap at the door. "Here she is." Deirdre smiled, catching the quickly suppressed frown on the faithful servant's face as she entered.

"Well, Day"—Mrs. Thursby's voice was condescending

—“how are you? You’re looking well—and so smart. *Quite* the maid!” The speech was edged.

For these were old enemies. Mrs. Thursby, who rarely kept her Abigails for over a year, resented the fact that Deirdre with her slender means could ensure fidelity.

“Thank you, mum, I’m nicely now.” She folded a spotless towel across the plated can of hot water. “It’s a long time since we’ve seen you, mum.” (“Tit for tat,” she said to herself, “I don’t expect she’s been invited—only here to make mischief!”) Then she turned to her mistress.

“May I have your tea-gown, mum? There’s a stitch wanted in the skirt.” She went to the wardrobe as she spoke and took down a new dress, shaking out the soft folds and throwing it across her arm with a gesture borrowed from Lisette.

“Will you be wearing your black to-night for the theatre, mum? Or your apricot silk?”

Deirdre could have laughed aloud.

“My black, I think. I’ll tell you later.” She saw through Day’s sudden zeal. As a matter of fact, these three costumes completed the list of her evening dresses.

A bell rang far below and the sharp hammer of the knocker.

“There they are—shall we go down?”

Mrs. Thursby acquiesced, with a last critical glance at the mirror.

“Angèle—my new maid—is a perfect genius at doing hair. Do you like the way I wear it now?” She went on without a pause: “I got her from Lady Molyneux—a *treasure!*—so attached to me, and makes all my morning frocks. Day, will you just pin back my veil? Ah, no, not like that! Can’t you see that catches my hair? Give it to me, I’d better do it. *Thank you.*” She rustled out to add on the stairs a loud “aside.” “Poor Day—so willing—but one can’t expect her to be *trained!*”

## CHAPTER XXIII

HAD Deirdre not been labouring under the intimate sense of failure which her mother so often induced in her—a sense of hunting vainly to find the door which led to the other's heart—she would have realized that the lunch, socially, achieved success.

The Squire, with his almost uncanny perception of tension in the atmosphere, had recognised a hint of strain beneath Deirdre's welcoming smile. He had set himself determinedly to captivate the elderly lady; and when the Squire "stooped to conquer" he rarely failed in his enterprise!

Mrs. Thursby, placed between an attentive host and a well-known peer, flattered on her weakest point by becoming the centre of conversation, felt her doubts and anxieties fade like clouds before the sun.

Lord Courthorpe, a middle-aged man with a ruddy skin, mediocre brains and a cheery and possessive manner towards women old and young, entered into Mesurier's game heartily, dividing his time between the mother and the daughter.

He had approved of Hyacinth at first sight. Here was a girl, lovely, simple and well-bred, sufficiently dowered for his favourite nephew, whose conduct of late had been erratic, causing him some anxiety.

"Quite time he settled down," was the thought uppermost in his mind and with a skill born of practice, he manœuvred the young pair's isolation.

The well-served, dainty lunch, excellent wine and conventional chatter had produced a reaction in Mrs. Thursby. She purred now like a sleek cat.

"After all," she told herself, "Deirdre is seeing life under pleasant auspices. No doubt my maternal anxiety led me into a slight error. Mr. Mesurier is charming and his daughter a nice simple girl who seems attached to Deirdre. It shows one shouldn't listen to gossip."

With which virtuous summing-up, she proceeded to lay her cards on the table.

"I've heard so much about Weavers," she smiled coquettishly at the Squire. "One of my greatest friends in Brighton has been spending the summer at Dieppe and she met there your rector's wife and another lady, whose name I forget, but who lived at a place called the Grange."

"Ah, yes, the Pontefracts," Mesurier spoke indifferently, his eyes resolutely turned away from Hyacinth's glance of attention.

Mrs. Thursby drifted on.

"Of course, my friend was interested, as she knew that my daughter was staying there. She liked Mrs. Pontefract—not good-looking, but very sincere, and wrapped up in Zenana work."

A ribald murmur crossed the table.

"What's that, a new fruit?"—Bolsover was whispering to Hyacinth—"or am I mixing it up with bananas?" A ripple of youthful laughter followed.

Mesurier, with a faint smile, picked up the threads of the conversation.

"I believe she goes in for charity—of the kind that does not begin at home! Is that too severe?" His mouth twisted. "As a matter of fact, although she's a neighbour, we see very little of her. Mrs. Gage is our tennis champion, an acquisition at tournaments and *persona grata* at the Grange. I believe they were both at school together."

Mrs. Thursby, watching her host, from his casual manner shrewdly divined that the ladies in question did not reach the social status required at the Hall.

This, she thought, might explain much that was spiteful in the conversations carefully retailed to her anent the Squire's eccentricity and his open penchant for her daughter.

She glanced sideways at Deirdre and caught her laughing words to Courthorpe.

"I must admit I love a farce! I'm looking forward to Hawtrey to-night. Have you seen the new Gaiety piece? I hear it's gorgeous—*such* dresses!"

"Ask Reggie!" Courthorpe twinkled. "He's one of the pillars of the place." A suggestion of dryness was in the speech and the young soldier looked up sharply.

"Are you talking of 'Clorinda's Curls'? Simply rattling! You ought to see it. Jolly music, goes with a swing and the chorus the prettiest in London!"

He spoke almost defiantly. Courthorpe was seized with a brilliant notion. He had realised that Hyacinth had roused his nephew's admiration. What a contrast she would make, with her delicate grace and silvery laugh, to that other charmer whose "footlight smile" was making such inroads on Reggie's purse. He decided to put it to the test.

"We must have a box there one night. Soon—if you've got an evening free. What do you say, Mesurier?" He nodded to him over his glass.

"Excellent, if I'm in town. But I know Hyacinth would enjoy it." He smiled happily at his daughter. She was looking very pretty, he thought.

"And wind up with a little supper." Courthorpe beamed round at the party. "Can't you come, Mrs. Thursby?" He included her gallantly.

"I'm afraid not," she affected to sigh. "I'm a Country Mouse—I live at Brighton."

Mesurier glanced at Deirdre, the same thought in both their minds: a somewhat decorative rodent wreathed in sweet simplicity.

"I'm only up in town for the day," the Country Mouse went on to explain, "but I wanted to get a peep at my daughter."

"To see if she were behaving herself?" The speaker laughed uproariously, rubbing his hands—a habit of his when greatly amused. Little he guessed how the chance shot had hit the target in the centre.

Mesurier saw a faint glow of colour rise in the faded cheeks and a little flutter, purely nervous, of Mrs. Thursby's thin white fingers.

"That's it!" She nodded her head gaily. The Squire admired her courage. For Deirdre was watching the pair, her own face inscrutable.

"And the verdict?" enquired the peer, with a wicked sidelong glance at the daughter.

"Ah . . . !" said Mrs. Thursby sweetly. "It's not the fashion nowadays to praise one's children openly!"

"Now I call that hedging!" Courthorpe broke into another infectious laugh and leaned nearer Deirdre. "I don't mind betting you, two to one, she's got a lecture up her sleeve! She's only sparing your feelings in public, because she's so tender-hearted. Never mind," he lowered his voice, "you're sure to have other compensations. A pretty woman always has!"

"Thank you!" Deirdre laughed. This elderly man of the world amused her. He had a very charming manner which took from his little familiarities all suggestion of offence.

"The law of balance?" suggested Mesurier. He could not resist the jealous temptation to turn her thoughts towards himself, aware that the words held memories.

But Deirdre was on her guard under her mother's watchful eye.

Bolsover chimed in.

"What about this theatre party? Seems to me that my worthy uncle is hedging himself! You mark my words, it's one of those pleasant invitations that are tossed about over the port and never achieve a settled date. *I* know 'em!" He turned to Hyacinth. "The only way to get even is to borrow money from the host—the would-be evasive host—and then, you see, you're fixed for good in his defective memory."

"You ought to be soundly fixed in mine," Courthorpe chuckled, "eh, Reggie?" His ruddy face was a comical mixture of severity and indulgence. He was very fond of his brother's son. The boy was his heir, the last of the line, and he wanted to see him "settled down" and out of the hands of "that Gaiety minx"!

"Well to prove that your theory's right——" He drew out a diminutive book, screwing up his prominent eyes, where the tell-tale lines formed a net-work, and peered narrowly at the entries.

"Such a lot on just now, isn't there?" he said ruefully.



"There!" Reggie roared with delight. "What did I tell you?" Every one laughed.

There came a knock at the front door. Deirdre, turning her head, signalled to Charles, with a quiet order. "In here, if it's Mr. Trollope."

"Would the fifth of November suit you?" Courthorpe addressed the chaperon. "You've no conscientious objections to making merry on Guy Fawkes Day?"

"Only that I think a bomb might wake up the Government *now*." Her eyes twinkled. "I'm not alluding, of course, to the House of Lords."

Courthorpe grinned. "Then that's all right, provided, of course, I can get a box."

"Another saving clause!" said the Squire. "Don't forget he mentioned supper."

"Now, look here," protested Courthorpe, "is this my party or is it yours?"

"That's what I want to know," laughed Mesurier.

Courthorpe gave him up in disgust. "Well, Mrs. Caradoc?" He turned to her appealingly. ("Just as if she were really the first to be consulted," thought Mrs. Thursby. She felt a complacent glow of pride. It did not occur to her that this fact, considered earlier in the day, would have confirmed her worst suspicions!)

"You're free that evening, Hyacinth?" Deirdre smiled across at the girl with intention. Here was the real guest.

"Yes, the fifth. It's the night before Aunt Byng takes me to that ball at the Ritz. I know I kept it free."

"Is that the Massey's dance? I'm going," Reggie broke in eagerly. "You'll keep me some spaces on your card, won't you? We'll fix it up at the theatre."

"Then the fifth it is," decided Courthorpe. "I'll drop you a line later on." He paused as Trollope was announced.

"Hullo, Ralph!" Mesurier nodded, introducing him casually. "Pull up a chair for yourself. Coffee or a glass of port?"

"Now, do I *look* a teetotaler?" He stooped over Deirdre and wrung her hand until she winced.

"You're too hearty, Sailor-boy!" This was his Weavers nickname.

"Awfully sorry!" He sat down at her elbow and with a mischievous face added in an audible whisper: "You shouldn't give it away like that!" His glance roamed round the table. "Is that your mother?" he lowered his voice. "I must tell her that I know Jack."

"Yes, do, she'll be quite excited."

Courthorpe claimed her attention.

"Do you like the *Carlton* or the *Savoy*?"

Reggie, in a loud aside, "Or the '*Petits Pois*'?"

Hyacinth giggled. This irrepressible youth amused her.

"One and sixpence, including wine," he informed her solemnly.

Courthorpe, having settled the place for supper, attacked Mesurier.

"Now, then, you're coming; none of your pressing country engagements!"

The Squire was counting on his fingers.

"It's a Friday? That's awkward. I always spend week-ends at Weavers, and on the fifth I've promised to go to a local agricultural dinner."

Courthorpe scowled.

"I know you!" He turned towards Mrs. Thursby. "A regular hermit—hates London—thinks of nothing but his garden! He and I were at College together, I won't say how many years ago, and here we are, *vieux jeu*, watching the young generation flirt."

Mrs. Thursby actually rose to the gay spirit of the lunch. "And aiding with your *experience*?" she gave him demure encouragement.

"How can I help it, sitting here?" He moved heavily to his feet as Deirdre gave the signal to Hyacinth. "I assure you I'm not frivolous, except under provocation. Now, why does she choose to break up the party just as I was mustering courage. . . ."

But Mrs. Thursby found refuge in flight.

"I must say good-bye, Mr. Mesurier. I've neglected my shopping duties sadly, but I've so much enjoyed my lunch and the pleasure of meeting you and your daugh-

ter. Don't spoil my little girl." She held out her hand to him.

Mesurier answered rather gravely.

"It's quite the other way about. If you knew the relief it was to my mind to feel she is here with Hyacinth. There are so few people I could trust with the guardianship. You understand?"

His dark eyes probed her own. For a moment his sincerity brought to the surface the best in her and she ceased to be artificial.

"I do. I'm very much relieved—I mean——" She was obviously confused at the slip and tried to cover it. "Deirdre is——"

"Quite perfect!" the Squire laughed. "No, of course, *you* couldn't say it and I shouldn't—but that's what we think of her. I hope you'll come and see us again, whenever you happen to be in town."

"Thanks very much. I should like to."

He watched the slim and dignified figure move round, making farewells; saw Trollope intercept her and, all unconscious, cement the bond by boyish praise of her son; smiled in his sleeve as Deirdre warded off Lord Courthorpe, full of wine and gallantry, and turned herself at the door to give the Squire a parting glance.

In it he read shy gratitude.

The task had been an irksome one. For nothing in common lay between Mesurier and his widowed guest. He had summed her up conclusively before the second course had passed.

Yet now he felt wholly rewarded for the patient, skilful flattery so averse to his whole nature. He had cleared a tangle in Deirdre's path.

A fragment of verse recurred to him as he saw the door close behind the beloved face, and he murmured it, lost in tender retrospection:

"Is it so small a thing  
To have enjoyed the sun,  
To have lived light in the spring  
To have loved, to have thought, to have done?"

He was brought rudely back to the present by Courthorpe's chuckle.

"Well, old hermit, that's an uncommonly pretty woman!"

Upstairs Mrs. Thursby arranged her sleek mouse-coloured hair, complacently talking all the while.

"And so, my dear, I'm glad I came. I must admit that Adela gave me cause for anxiety. You know she met Mrs. Pontefract at Dieppe with your rector's wife." She paused, her eyes on Dierdre's face, mirrored in the narrow glass.

"Our village gossips." The quiet voice was contemptuous. "I see now where all your strange ideas came from."

But she felt a certain sense of relief. It had puzzled her throughout the lunch, the knowledge that her mother had seemed so cognisant of her affairs. She had felt faint doubts of Cousin Maddie.

"I hope that you will write to me"—Mrs. Thursby powdered her nose daintily, then dusted it with a little square of chamois leather—"and tell me more of your future plans. About Mark——" She hesitated. "I am not, as you think, without sympathy. I am fully aware of his trying moods. It must be difficult at times to put up with his sullen temper. But you have to look ahead, my child. Your life just now is an interim"—she was pleased with the word and allowed herself a slight concession—"with pleasant people. I'll admit that—and pleasant surroundings. But we can't always live for pleasure. We are not placed in this world for that but to obey the call of Duty"—she passed a stick of red pomade across her lips—"and to think of others." Peering narrowly in the glass, she wiped away the tell-tale smear.

"Isn't that like her?" thought Deirdre. "First she paints, then effaces it for fear that people might say she painted!"

Mrs. Thursby resumed her discourse, unaware of her daughter's silence.

"It's a pity you ever met Mark. I did not approve of it from the start. If you'd waited, taken your mother's advice . . ." She broke off to tie her veil.

"*But*," she thrust out her pointed chin to keep the net in its place, "you were always such an impulsive girl. A short engagement—a speedy marriage——" She sighed as she pinned down the ends. "Is that tidy?" She turned her head.

"Quite." Deirdre had to smile, but in her heart she felt indignant.

Her mother's practised "sleight of mind," as the Squire called this juggling with facts, left her convinced that Deirdre had narrowly escaped an elopement.

The truth was that the girl herself had pleaded for a longer engagement but her mother had hurried on the wedding to allow for her own departure South.

Now, as Mrs. Thursby packed away her toilet requisites in an inner pocket of her bag, Deirdre moved to the door and listened.

"I'm afraid I shall have to go down soon. I hear the men coming up and Hyacinth wants to escape to the Zoo with her cousin before it gets too late."

Mrs. Thursby drew herself up. "I'm sure I don't wish to be in the way. Perhaps, *some one* could call me a cab?" Her voice suggested injured pride.

"Yes, of course, if you're ready, Mamma. I don't want to hurry you, but I have my 'duties' to attend to. Hyacinth is very young."

She had yielded to a spark of malice. Mrs. Thursby never tired of bringing in the word "duty" and of stating that she "lived for it."

Her mother drifted to the stairs reluctantly, fastening her glove.

"A pretty girl, but rather strange. No doubt, she wants bringing out. Her father quite a man of the world." (Deirdre smiled. Poor Rollo!) "And what was the name of the naval boy who knew Jack? I didn't catch it."

"Trollope. He's the Squire's nephew. I met him before I went to Weavers."

"Really?" She trailed down slowly, pausing twice to admire the pictures. Every inch of her graceful form shewed that she did not intend to be hurried.

She knew that her daughter was fidgeting to ensure

Hyacinth's afternoon pleasure. But, according to her narrow outlook, her own dignity was at stake.

Even in the entrance hall as the taxi buzzed outside the door she detained Deirdre to explain the whereabouts of a well-known shop.

Then conscious that precious pennies were ticking away recklessly, she kissed her daughter on both cheeks.

"Good-bye; my child." She straightened her veil. "I shall expect a letter soon. I'm glad to see you looking so well. Ah, what a blessing it is to be young!"

## CHAPTER XXIV

MESURIER closed the drawing-room door behind him with a sigh of relief.

"Gone?" Deirdre asked, amused.

"Yes, thank Heaven! Courthorpe kept me, unloading a 'chestnut' on the doorstep. In the middle forgot the point and started another. I could have slain him!"

Deirdre laughed. "What was the story?"

"Lord knows, I didn't listen. Judged by his face when to laugh and he went off shouting: 'I knew you'd like it!'

"He's a dear old ass all the same—took me back to the days of my youth, when I hauled him out of a hopeless mess with a seductive female tobacconist! Reggie will be just like him—I shan't let Hyacinth marry there. He's mixed up with some Gaiety girl. Courthorpe's very worried about it. Faugh!" He flung himself down in a chair, "how I loathe this London life!"

"You look tired." She studied his face.

"Couldn't sleep. I spent last night trying in vain to recapture a phase in my youth—that of writing verses." He laughed rather consciously. "No fool like an old one! So I gave it up and read a pamphlet on the virtues of Intensive Culture!"

He dragged his chair nearer hers.

"What shall we do this afternoon? Let's look at you first, you blessed creature!"

"Well?" she smiled back at him. "How do I stand dissipation?"

"Resistently. You've still a freckle, right on the bridge of your charming nose. Is that what you were anxious to hear?" He went off in a boyish laugh.

"Yes, precisely. It breathes of Weavers. Let's get out in the open air! This house is full of stale cigars."

"I hope you only mean the smoke? What about a

drive to Hampstead. It's a chilly wind—are you afraid?"

"Not a bit, it will do me good. I want to talk about Hyacinth and I can't here. I'm afraid of Lisette. She suffers from earache—it's hardly fair—keyholes are such draughty things."

She was off, laughing at his expression. "I shan't be long, you can order the taxi."

Her eyes were bright as she ran upstairs and a latent touch of vanity led her to wear the new hat that toned with her well-worn dark furs. She tucked a bunch of violets in between the lapels of her coat and rang for Day and her strongest boots, foreseeing the drive might end in a tramp.

The maid laced them up securely, talking meanwhile. Unwittingly, she checked her mistress' gaiety by a chance allusion to Caradoc.

"I passed the flat last evening, mum. The porter's wife asked me in but it was late and I hadn't time. She sez they've got the workmen there doing it up—ever so smart! The master's not been well at all—had to have the doctor to him. She told me all this on the doorstep."

"What is the matter?" Deirdre frowned.

"Oh, nothing much, mum—pains in 'is arm. New Rices, I think it's called. But he doesn't have to stay indoors."

"You didn't see him?"

"Yes'm, I did. Not there but near the station. He was walking quite briskly, mum—there's no need for you to worrit."

"Did he speak to you?"

"Oh, no, mum. He wasn't looking my way—just staring straight ahead—and that browned by his holiday, I shouldn't have taken him to be ill." This was a subterfuge of Day's, for Caradoc's arm was in a sling.

Her words flashed a picture up before the eyes of her mistress. The tall figure, with head well back and absent gaze, striding down the lamp-lit familiar road, homeward bound—to the empty flat.

An odd sensation of pity moved her; it was almost



like a twinge of conscience! How was it all going to end, this comedy of separation? Or was it in truth a tragedy?

She went listlessly downstairs.

The Squire realised the change in Deirdre's mood and respected it in silence, save for a casual remark, as they drove up South Audley Street. But when they reached Regent's Park and found themselves in the quiet road, where the bare trees fringing it shewed presently, between the boughs, glimpses of the dark canal, he moved sideways in the taxi and laid a hand over hers.

"What is it, Deirdre?"

"A new worry—Mark's ill. It's a fear that has always haunted me—that I shall be forced to go back to him. And I can't, Rollo. I *can't*, now."

Into Mesurier's face the light of a great hope flashed up; his fingers tightened instinctively on the passive ones in his clasp. "No?" He tried to steady his voice. "I see. Or, rather, my dear, I don't! I've never liked to question you but of course I've guessed at some trouble."

Deirdre stared ahead.

"I ought to have told you—long ago."

"Why?" He leaned nearer her. "Whatever belongs to your past life is sacred to me. It has formed you—the real you—and that's enough. I've no curiosity. But if the present holds a danger of sorrow or perplexity and I can help, it's another matter. Otherwise let's bury it among our 'dead yesterdays.'"

They swerved round over the bridge and into the long Avenue Road. Mesurier released her hand and drew back in his own corner. It was part of his scrupulous care of her and she felt touched, as ever, by it. Simply she told him the whole story.

Once she saw his fingers grip the side of the cab, his mouth grim, but he kept silent until, at last, she paused breathless, her cheeks flushed and glanced sideways, a silent question shining in her troubled eyes.

Even then all he said was a simple: "Yes. I understand."

She could not tell that beneath his control lurked a

longing to kill this other man who had won her love and wasted it and made of her youth an arid desert.

"I want," he said, "to be quite unbiassed, if it's possible—keep my reason intact." He passed a hand across his face as if to blot out the sight of her. For he realised, to his cost, the weak point in the case. "May I say what I like, what I honestly think, without the fear of hurting you?"

"Please." But he saw her shoulders stiffen.

"You believe that you have a valid excuse for leaving your husband? That what he said in a fit of temper was the *truth*—a definite statement of his opinion?"

"Yes. In a sense"—she bit her lip—"I don't think he really needs me, that he still cares for me, in the least."

"Then why does he ignore your conduct, dwell on the chance of your return? It's obvious, isn't it, Deirdre, that he wouldn't be having the flat done up unless it were to welcome you home?"

"I suppose so." Her voice was doubtful.

"Well, have you any definite reason to think it could be for another woman?"

"No—oh, no!" she shrank from him. "Mark isn't—like that."

"I see." Her faintly indignant voice had settled another doubt of his. But Deirdre for the first time wondered if the Squire had failed her. Where was his tender intuition, his sympathy and understanding? She had lost the lover in the judge. She resented this steady questioning.

On went the merciless voice.

"So Caradoc plays a game of patience, counting on your loyalty, your natural goodness, your marriage vows; confident that one day, sooner or later, you will return?"

"It's damned clever." His brows were knit. "Granted an illness or accident, with this veiled and uncertain situation, you've no legitimate excuse to offer to your own conscience. Once go back and the game is his—a second rebellion would fall flat, your prestige too sorely shaken. And although you say he 'doesn't care,' in your heart of hearts you know he *does* and this breeds

pity and remorse. You're losing strength through a sense of injustice."

"Rollo!" She could bear no more. She leaned forward to check the driver. She must get out, escape from him, before his logic overwhelmed her.

"I never thought that you—you—" she broke off, with a nervous gesture. But her outstretched arm as it neared the chauffeur was caught and held in an iron grip. Mesurier's voice when he spoke again was that of a master, keen, compelling.

"Deirdre, look at me!"

Angry, amazed, she turned her head. So poignant was the grief on his face that her own heart dropped a beat; a little cry broke from her lips.

"Didn't you *know*?"—his eyes pierced her—"I've got to be just—to think straight—where your life's happiness is at stake. To cut out the naked truth, though the knife turns on myself! I *daren't* let my love for you warp my judgment—it's too vital. Do you think that I haven't counted the cost? The risk of losing you—on earth."

"Why 'on earth'?" She spoke dully, stunned by this unforeseen sternness. Dimly she wanted to gain time to grasp his meaning, his forcible words.

"Because"—he smiled mournfully—"afterwards you are bound to know; to understand and forgive me. It's only the flesh that's blinding you. In the spirit we shall be one again."

The solemn triumph of his voice startled her. Upon his face was a curious light. He still smiled, his gaze lost in visions afar.

All her rancour fell away before the faith she divined. Impulsively she turned to him.

"Rollo? You think I'm doing wrong?"

"Yes." The answer was unflinching. "You're deceiving yourself consciously. You're working on a false premise that your husband no longer cares for you, that you no longer care for him." He moistened his lips, bitterly dry, and went on in a husky voice: "Yet you know in your soul it is open to doubt. Passion may be dead between you but the old link still holds good,

that second love of married life: the 'pot of honey on the grave.'"

"And you think—I ought to return to him?"

"For God's sake don't ask me that!" His head went down upon his hands. "There are limits to a man's endurance." Muffled words came up to her. "Look into your own heart—count the cost, the compensation. I can't be captain of your soul."

The taxi jerked up over the crest of the long and laborious hill. They were out now on the open heath, aware of the wide vault of the sky.

The wind whistled in their ears as they spun across the broad stretch with sun-browned grass on either side towards the far-off belt of trees. A subtle air of desolation, heightened by contrast with the town, hung over this outer fringe of country, devoid of human life.

Deirdre voiced her restlessness.

"I can't sit here—I want to walk. Stop him, please."

The Squire obeyed. Mechanically he told the man to wait for them "near the pond."

The chauffeur grumbled.

"I've got a job, later on. I'd sooner you paid, sir."

Mesurier smiled wearily at the obvious mistrust of the remark, and doubled his tip.

"All right, we shan't want you."

They turned down a side track over sandy uneven soil between the stunted, leafless bushes.

It led them quickly out of sight of the higher level of the road behind a knot of twisted elders, where a trail of blackberry caught the eye with vivid leaves—the blood of Autumn.

Deirdre broke the silence first.

"To go back—to that old life . . ." She shivered and stopped suddenly. "I *can't*, Rollo. I don't love him."

Mesurier's hands were tightly clenched.

"But he loves you, in his own fashion."

"And haven't I paid the price?" she cried. "Haven't I *earned* my liberty? Worked for him—lived for him—swallowed insult after insult! What more could a woman do?"

"Face facts and speak the truth." The harsh words

were softened to her by the earnest pleading of his glance. "Give him a last fighting chance and clear your conscience utterly. You'll have to meet him, Deirdre, face to face, and have it out, without fear and without pity—state your case honestly."

He saw her flinch and set her teeth.

"Deirdre, it's the only way. There's no salvation in half-measures. If you're afraid of Caradoc and the influence of the old ties, it's a proof that your love is not wholly dead. You're living haunted by a ghost. It can only be laid by drastic action—by Truth, in fact, essential Truth. No one can help you but yourself. By your heart's judgment you must stand."

They had reached a little sandy patch sheltered by trees, where a wooden bench, scored with interlaced initials and names roughly carved by lovers, testified to stolen meetings and vows breathed in the joy of Youth.

Deirdre sank down on it, obeying a sudden desire to rest.

"You wish this?" Her hands passed restlessly over the seat, polished by the touch of Time. "Is it a test you're setting me?"

"Perhaps."

His breath quickened a little as he stood there watching her face. All his manhood stirred in him and prompted him that now was the moment to gather her up in his arms and seal her his for evermore.

He dug his heels into the ground, resisting the powerful temptation. Something of the man's struggle was communicated to her senses.

"It's the only way?"

He nodded his head.

"Very well. I'll see Mark, whatever happens . . ." Her voice was hopeless. "Just because you say it's right."

After a moment she lifted her head and gave him a rather wistful look.

"You're so strong. I've always known it. Strong enough to protect me against my own impulses. Why is that?"

Mesurier smiled.

"God knows! Perhaps because you're my ideal. One doesn't tamper with ideals at my age—they're too precious."

He crossed the narrow space between them and sat down at the end of the bench. For the battle was over, fought and won. He felt limp from the reaction.

"Am I forgiven for hurting you?"

He asked it as simply as a child.

"Yes. Of course. I should have known." But he felt there was still something wanting.

After a little she spoke again.

"What did you mean by 'a pot of honey'?"

"Only those lines of Meredith—they seemed apposite just then."

He repeated them courageously:

"'A kiss is but a kiss now! and no wave  
Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea.  
But, as you will! we'll sit contentedly,  
And eat our pot of honey on the grave.'"

He understands, doesn't he?"

"Yes." Her hands were tightly clasped. Faint horror dawned in her eyes.

"I couldn't do that—it's a mockery. How hard it is to see the way! I thought I'd put all this behind me, won my freedom long ago. But although it hurts, you've helped me, Rollo. What a friend you've been to me!"

The past tense made him wince, and suddenly his patience snapped.

"I'm not a friend—I'm your lover." His head went up, his eyes blazed. "I think we've said enough to-day to have done with any conventional cant! If you and Caradoc should part, you're mine—I've earned a right to you. God knows, I've played fair. But when I think of your past life, the crass stupidity and neglect . . ." He stopped abruptly, startled in turn. For Deirdre's face was a revelation. Cheeks flushed, she leaned towards him breathlessly.

"I thought . . . I thought . . ." She could say no more; shame seized her.

"That I'd changed?"

He flung back his head and laughed. "You silly child—you . . . *utter dear!* Deirdre"—he breathed her name as though it lay, a caress, on his lips—"you're like some wonderful flower to me, planted in cold and arid soil with never a chance of bearing fruit, pining for years in the dark. Why, you're only *half* a woman, sweet! Even now you don't know love. You stand there, just on the brink, like a child who dreads the first plunge.

"But if I ever can take you, dear, into my garden and show you life as God and Nature planned it first, watch your petaled soul unfold, leaf by leaf in the warmth and light—ah!" He stretched out his arms to her; then with an effort let them fall.

"Come, it's time we were going home."

She rose without another word.

"I shall see you to-morrow to say good-bye—just for a minute. After that I shall stay quietly at Weavers until I have a line from you."

"I'll write at once"—she smiled faintly—"as soon as I know." He understood.

They moved slowly up the path. Above them a cloud shut out the sun and a chill wind stirred the bushes with the crackling note of withered leaves. Beyond, on the high road, a brewer's dray rumbled along heavily, drawn by a pair of dappled horses, and the driver's voice reached their ears as he cursed one of them for stumbling.

It needed this material touch to stir Mesurier from his dream. He was depressed unaccountably; a prey to a dull foreboding. Yet Deirdre was there by his side; life should have been full of joy without this steady obsession of his.

For all the way up the rough slope he had felt a shadowy third between them.

## CHAPTER XXV

THE drawing-room in Deanery Street was a double one. Folding-doors had originally divided the front section from the space behind, where the light was dim, through a single window shadowed by the neighbouring houses.

Hyacinth had removed the doors and now a screen of Spanish leather stood at the junction of the rooms, one end against the wall. Behind this, across the angle, was a beautiful old French bureau sacred to its young mistress. It blocked the door that led to the stairs effectually and the former was hidden by a panel of faded tapestry.

In this snug corner, tucked away from observation, Hyacinth sat on the morning after the luncheon party, pen in hand, lost in thought. Before her lay a diary, vellum bound, with a gilded lock and from time to time she jotted down an entry on the open page.

This secret book was duly inscribed:

"To Chris: a Record of Days of Exile."

Beneath was a morbid youthful touch:

"To be burnt, *unread*, in case of Death."

The contingency, to her eighteen summers, seemed so remote that a faint smile curved her lips whenever she saw it. But it added to the solemnity of the one-sided correspondence.

For the pages held daily letters to the far-off Chris, those same epistles she had promised her father she would not post.

The first tentative yellow fog hovered over the London streets, weighing the air and muffling sound, but not dark enough as yet to warrant the use of electric light.

Hyacinth, bending over her book, found a strange



comfort in the sense of melancholy that the day induced. Sub-consciously she realized that the setting was perfect for thwarted love.

"So you see, Chris," she wrote sadly, "that I'm thinking of you every minute. Some day, perhaps, you will read these words and realize what I have suffered during these weeks of 'make-belief,' of wearily playing a hopeless part."

This ended the first period. After due thought she started again.

"If only I felt *quite* sure about Deirdre and Rollo?

"It's dreadful to be torn asunder between two loves, the old and new! For Rollo's always been to me the dearest of friends as well as fathers. And I can't leave him desolate, even for you, best-beloved.

"I'm certain he's fond of Deirdre. They think, of course, that I'm utterly blind, a mere child, guessing nothing! As if Love didn't make one wise. Why, I saw it begin, months ago, one wet day in Weavers' woods, and effaced myself speedily, the very best of chaperons!

"What puzzles me now is if Deirdre knows; faces it, foresees results? Is she truly in love with him? And, if so, what about her husband?

"It's an absurd situation. Here we are, you and I, torn apart as though our love were a mortal sin and disgrace, just because you're married, Chris; whilst Deirdre, bound herself, sees Rollo continually and he makes open love to her, not perhaps in actual words, but his eyes betray him at every turn.

"Ethically, it seems to me that their case is worse than ours. They haven't the excuse of youth! Moreover, they've both loved before. Oh, I'm so thankful, my darling Chris, that I met you first—the first man who ever dared to touch my lips—yours from the first breathless vision: the knowledge of what you meant to me in the Spring wonder of the woods."

She dipped her pen into the ink thoughtfully, with shining eyes.

"Love seems to belong to the country, free and vital, a gift of Nature. In London it's fogged by a sense of

intrigue—purely worldly consideration—a shadowy love, played like a game that has lost its zest through repetition.

"How is my dear friend Hotspur? Kiss his sleek, soft neck for me! Do you know that Deirdre saw you once galloping home in the moonlight? Ah, those happy, happy days. Will they *ever* return, beloved? . . . And the summer night's when Rollo slept and I crept out of our wooden lodge to meet you by the edge of the lake. You used to call me your little Dryad.

"Do you sometimes now close your eyes and picture yourself waiting, breathless, for the rustling leaves and the furtive step, and *then* . . . Oh, Chris, how hard it is!

"And the woodpecker's nest, our letter box? The notes hid deep in the dried old moss, and the 'patteran' to guide your steps in the glade where the three paths met?

"Do you remember that thrilling night when Jevons took you for a poacher and you cut your hand getting over the wall? And the way you evaded Second-Best by lying down behind the rushes? Olga wouldn't let you alone—*she* knew! But Second-Best was sure it was a fox or badger! I had to pretend to sprain my foot and get him to help me up the hill and you were so deliciously vexed because you saw me taking his arm!

"You were always jealous! What would you say if you were here in London now, watching me flirt with aged men who behave like boys, and weary youths, tired of all that makes life sweet?

"How I hate them—these London men. Nature's leavings, city-bound, sapped by luxury and pleasure. Too severe? I see you smile, vigorous and keen yourself! Of course, one meets with a few exceptions. Yesterday—" she broke off, head raised, listening.

For Deirdre had entered the room beyond, hidden from Hyacinth by the screen. After her came another step and the sound of the door, softly closed.

Rollo! Hyacinth blotted the page and closed the diary hurriedly. She was just rising to her feet when her father's voice made her pause.

"Well, dear heart, it's good-bye. Until you've seen Caradoc."

"Dear heart!" Hyacinth's eyes widened at the caressing words.

"Yes, I suppose so." Deirdre spoke under her breath, wistfully. "I wrote last night to arrange a meeting. I expect it will have to be at the flat."

"Why not here?" Mesurier's question evoked a faint sigh on her part.

"No, I didn't even suggest it. It seemed as though I were afraid."

"I wish, my dear, I could spare you this." Hyacinth caught the noise of a chair pulled up over the parquet floor. "But it wouldn't do, it would make things worse, the complication we want to avoid."

"You mean?"

"That I should see him myself."

"Heavens, no, impossible! He'd think——" She paused. He finished the speech:

"That I was the cause, the main cause of your decision to live apart. I couldn't pretend to be unbiassed. He'd guess at once that I loved you."

Hyacinth, behind the screen, clasped her hands tightly together.

It was true, then? More than that, understood, since they spoke so freely—part of a plan framed between them. Hope vibrated in her heart.

Suddenly her own position rose before her, confounding her. She was playing the spy, eavesdropping!

Her cheeks tingled. She glanced round nervously, seeking escape. But the only way was through the room where the lovers, unsuspecting, plotted. She recognized that it was too late. She had overheard more than enough to arouse their suspicion of her conduct if she appeared upon the scene with an air of innocence. Better by far remain hid than court a hateful explanation.

Her brain moved with lightning speed. Rollo had his train to catch; she glanced at the clock. Ten minutes at most before the car would be at the door. Deirdre

would see him off and then she could slip out silently and make her escape to her bedroom.

Meanwhile, she would not listen. "I can't—it's mean, unthinkable!" She placed her hands over her ears and closed her eyes, aware of a glass in which as she turned to mark the time she had caught a glimpse of a dark head.

But her thoughts whirled on tumultuously. Why was Deirdre so upset at the notion of meeting Caradoc? Did it mean an open rupture? If so, would she marry Rollo?

Why, then, that set her *free*, relieved her from her childish vow, never to desert her father.

A wife was better than a daughter.

At this crucial summing-up, for the first time, she became jealous.

Why should Deirdre supplant her? She swung between the two loves—the adoration she felt for Rollo and the newer passion for Pontefract. Then the insidious thought followed. Ethics did not count with them—the older pair—and yet they played so large a part in her own case. It wasn't fair! Her face darkened.

She could feel her heart beating fast. It seemed to pound up in her ears where her palms were rigorously pressed, and produced a curious suffocation. For a moment her fingers slipped apart, a purely physical act of grace, and in that moment a name slid over the screen, "Pontefract."

"Now," she thought angrily, "it is my right—I *shall* listen!"

She leaned forward across the table, scruples thrown to the four winds.

Deirdre was talking quickly.

"I meant to tell you yesterday, up on the heath, and then forgot. I had a little line from Chris, with some postcards which he promised me. He's gone back to the villa at Puy. He says he intends to stay there at present."

"Yes. I saw him last week at Weavers. I thought it wiser. People might talk. So I asked him up to lunch at the Hall. With his wife—it made things easier. I

must say he behaved well." Rollo paused, then went on: "I suppose you'll think me an odd parent, but I can't help feeling sorry for him. He's got the set look of a man kicking hard against the pricks. He spoke once of Hyacinth, just as he was leaving me, three words: 'How is she?' but his face was like a soul in hell. It must be bitter work for him, to know we've got her here in town meeting all sorts of younger rivals, men more polished than himself. I had an absurd sudden temptation to say, 'All right—still faithful!' There was a piteous look in his eyes, like a dog that's been kicked but remains loyal." Rollo groaned. "Oh, Lord! I don't know how it's going to end! You know he confessed in Dieppe, at that hateful interview we had, that he'd worked the whole future out: to give Mrs. Pontefract a right to divorce him—some other woman—one of those trumped-up affairs which satisfy our curious laws. That is, where they concern the rich, who can afford to purchase freedom!"

"But would she?" Deirdre's voice was doubtful.

"Yes, I think so," Mesurier answered. "He has a certain hold on her through some letters written by her father. I think I told you that Chris was trapped into that marriage by a trick—a silly midnight lark at the Grange. Chris was discovered in her room by old Simpson and Mrs. Gage. To save a doubtful situation, which was innocent, in point of fact, they gave out that they were engaged and then the lady held him to it. It was published in the local papers and noised abroad skilfully. Chris was up to his eyes in debt, and he knew he would have to relinquish his post if he broke free from the tangle and between one thing and another, including quixotic chivalry, he allowed himself to be tied down, to his and every one's regret.

"In a moment of hysterical folly, a year after, Mrs. Chris confessed to her father the part she had played. The old brewer had his faults but he was honest to the core. Chris was in London at the time. His father-in-law wrote to him—a letter full of remorse and anger: a fine, manly apology and, what is more, he forced his daughter to enclose a line in a similar vein.

"The whole thing was most imprudent, and added to the disharmony existing between the husband and wife. She crowned the unpleasant incident by an attempt to regain the letters, rifled Chris' private desk, and, in a fit of devilment, he placed the documents at his bank! There they have lain ever since, a perpetual secret bone of contention. I have no doubt that, used as a bribe, they would help Chris materially."

"But you wouldn't let Hyacinth marry a man who had been divorced, with a stain on his name?"

"God forbid. And yet," he sighed, "there's the child's happiness. If I place myself outside all this—my natural instincts as a father—my philosophy is sorely tried. Here are two young creatures, deeply in love, with no need to seek the approval of the world, careless of conventional claims, wasting their lives in futile regrets. Who am I to stand between them, to act as the rod of destiny? If it is love, real love, as Time alone is bound to prove, why should I break my daughter's heart to uphold the claims of respectability?"

"Chris as we knew him and Chris divorced is the same man essentially. His marriage was a mockery, himself the victim of worldly wisdom. Is that wisdom good enough, apart from what is known as 'ethics,' to warrant the suffering of Hyacinth, to condemn her, perhaps, to a single life?"

"For if she's a Mesurier she'll take love hard; we're not half-hearted! I've been watching her keenly these last days. She's true to Chris—it's no girlish fancy. I'm afraid it goes pretty deep—that time and absence will not cure it."

His voice changed. "Is that the car? I must go. It's harder every time to say good-bye, a physical wrench. You'll write?"

"Yes."

"As soon as you can?" There came a stir of chairs pushed back and a whisper from Deirdre; then the Squire spoke again:

"I shall sleep down in the woods to-night—tramp the glade. Will you dream of me? And, Deirdre, one last word: Don't fear to speak the truth. Cast behind

you that weak excuse—the words born of sheer temper. He never meant to let you go—you're not free—you must face that. But you *can* be, if you really wish it—if you think you can live without regrets. State your case openly. That you gave him all and in return met with indifference and neglect, were starved for love, bruised by his anger! Try and temper mercy with justice, reversing the old formula. A generous woman is sometimes the prey of compassion and apt to deceive herself. But don't confuse the issue, dear, by considering me in the case. I shall understand, *whatever* happens. All I want is your happiness. God bless you."

There came a pause, broken by a tap at the door. Then the solemn voice of Charles:

"The car, sir. It's a quarter to twelve."

"I'm coming. Has he fetched my luggage?"

"Yes, sir. It's turned to rain. Manvers asked if you'd like the hood?"

"Heavens, no!" Mesurier spoke impatiently and the man retreated.

A whisper followed, then the sound of steps slowly crossing the landing and receding down the stairs outside.

Hyacinth drew a breath of relief. Now was her chance! She stole out, round the screen, and gained the door. Here she paused to listen again. A murmur came up from the hall.

"Where's that child? She promised me she'd be back in time to say good-bye."

"I know she meant to," Deirdre answered. "I expect she's been detained somewhere. She went out shopping with Lisette."

"I can't wait. I've cut it too fine."

Hyacinth dared not linger now. Nervously she skimmed upstairs, fearing a creak of the well-worn boards, reached her room and in a panic turned, breathless, to lock the door.

Safe! Her hands were tightly clenched, the beautiful eyes full of scorn. Of all that had passed, a single phrase lingered dominant in her mind.

Chris, her Chris—she choked with anger—treated as

a malefactor; patronised, asked to lunch, his behaviour "approved" by this other pair of unauthorised secret lovers—his desperate need of her summed up in a sentence that pierced her passionate pride, "Like a dog that's been kicked but remains loyal!"



## CHAPTER XXVI

CARADOC replied from Bath. He wrote in pencil explaining the fact by an allusion to his neuritis which had "almost crippled" his right hand. He was down there taking a cure, work being "obviously out of the question."

The doctor ascribed his malady to "general run-downness and mental worry."

He left the cause of the latter symptom unexplained, but the tone of the letter filled the hiatus. It was ill-used and slightly aggressive. He was "quite willing" to talk things over, though he "couldn't understand in the least" what she meant by a "future arrangement!"

He suggested that she should come to Bath for a few days accordingly. It "isn't half a bad place; it might amuse you for a week—cooking good—" Deirdre smiled. The inducement was so typical.

If not, he would be in town for a board meeting on the 6th. Would she lunch with him at the flat? Better make it two o'clock. Unless she would rather meet him halfway, "Say the *Berkeley*—cheerier." Anyhow, she could decide.

The "new cook" was a success. He forgot if he'd told her "about Marie?" He had brought her back from Le Touquet, where she had cooked for a friend of his at a villa. "Makes an excellent omelette." Also her niece, a girl of eighteen. Between them they ran the flat.

"So you see," he wrote, "when you return you can turn Day into a lady's maid. I thought you'd like this arrangement—some one to shop and trot about with."

"A *cavaliere servante*, in fact, of the wrong sex, to relieve Mark!" Deirdre thought rather bitterly. "He never liked her and in this way he kills two birds with one stone."

He wound up:

"Send me a line to the Pump House Hotel.

"Your affecte

"Husband."

She answered the letter very briefly, regretting that she was engaged for an early lunch on the day in question, but would come to the flat at three o'clock.

The correspondence had brought with it the old cloud of depression: the sense of how far apart they were in their outlook on life and their convictions. Could pity breach the gulf?

And suddenly Cousin Maddie's words recurred to her:

"You English people are so fond of patching up. As if love could be mended like china!"

She was puzzled herself at the subtle change which had taken place in her mind of late. Where was the old confidence she had felt in resolving the situation? Why did she shrink from the interview, from meeting Caradoc face to face?

No twinge of conscience had troubled her on the day he had appeared at Weavers; no hesitation in her plan to cut adrift from him forever. Why had London opened up the whole question once again, blurred her vision and brought a strain of pity into their relations?

She sat there at her writing table, her chin propped upon her hands, staring out through the double panes at the dingy wall opposite.

Was it because—she stirred, restless, but pursued the thought to the bitter end—her own heart had betrayed her, no longer empty, filled with Rollo? Was she to blame if her whole soul had leaped out to meet its fellow; sure at last of a true mating, a sympathy of mind and body?

It followed that she wasn't "free." Rollo had said so, emphasized it. But she could be, if she chose! Why did she hesitate to cut the Gordian knot? Was it . . . shame? Her pride revolted at the thought, but rigidly she worked forward.

This pity then which she felt for Mark, this almost impersonal shred of affection, was based on the sense of her own failings: a knowledge of secret treachery!

Had she been faithless to her vows? But marriage involved both of them, was mutual in its obligations. Mark had failed her on that count; yet he in turn evinced no pity. He reserved it for himself alone, his own loneliness and discomfort, the barest shadow of all that she had suffered patiently for years.

If she went back—through a sense of duty?

"No!" She shuddered at the thought, conscious of physical revolt. "I couldn't! . . . I'd sooner give up Rollo."

Ah! . . . The truth broke in on her. This was what tied her, hand and foot. This Autumn love, sweet as the last lingering blossom on the roses, filled with a grace unknown to Spring.

Time paused in his ruthless course, and a mirage of her youth rose up, fair and dazzling, a city of Hope, in the dreary desert of middle age.

She could not banish it from the picture.

An open definite rupture with Mark threw her into her lover's arms. This weakened the main argument: that all she sought was "personal freedom."

Dimly she saw the choice ahead if she still preserved her old ideals, refusing to tamper with her conscience, and she shrank from the sacrifice involved.

Loneliness, crueller by far than any she had suffered yet: feeling the years weigh down on her; knowing that Rollo across the gulf set by herself was ageing too; that their golden hour of happiness had passed—never to return!

Could she bring herself to this? Was her character strong enough? Would life be worth the struggle?—this negation of love for the sake of her soul.

"Afterwards?" Her face went down onto her arms in utter despair. A sudden wave of religious doubt rose up, flooding her. Who could be *sure* of an "afterwards"?

Here were light and sound and touch—personal identity—thought, reason, sympathy.

Was it sane to stake so much on a future life when the body was dust, scattered to the winds of heaven? Where was the spirit, and where the reward?

On the other hand, the guerdon of earth—the happiness she had never known.

It was Rollo's creed: Happiness. A force that warmed the world around, was centred in Nature, potent, free: Paganism in modern guise.

Hyacinth believed in it. Where had it led her? To the verge of what was known as a mortal sin. *Was* sin only a name? Could love—a great love, that was of the spirit as well as the flesh—condone sin? Deirdre wondered.

There was the case of the Magdalen who had “loved much”—had been redeemed. Like many another tempted woman, she found consolation in the thought.

Then her honesty prevailed. Across her mind like a silver dart flashed the solemn warning: “Sin no more.”

When once a soul had realised the Christ message, had humbled itself to repentance and had been forgiven, there could be no slipping back lest “worse evil” befall the sinner.

There was no “*via media*,” but two paths—one crooked. If she had earned the right to freedom by years of patient faithful submission to the wayward moods of her husband and took her stand with him on this point she could not include in her vision a future with another man. Not if she were true to herself.

It meant the ultimate sacrifice.

Far ahead there lay the chance that Death might solve the grim enigma, that she might be free legally, but she shrank, sensitive, from the thought. She could not, dared not, count on it!

Besides, she was thirty-five. Ten, fifteen years would see her beauty spent; the radiant charm of her still warm vitality ebbing into a weakly flame.

She thought of her mother, bending down towards the glass anxiously, the stick of lip-salve in her hand, those flaccid and discoloured lips.

And then of Rollo, endlessly young, Rollo in the prime of life.

Time was kinder to his sex. Grey hairs, she thought,

would suit him. A wistful smile curved her mouth as she pictured him with his gipsy face and his brilliant eyes still undimmed.

No, it was *now*, if she willed it, or never!

There came the sound of an opening door. Hyacinth swung into the room, Olga close upon her heels.

"You there," she broke off, "day-dreaming?"

Her voice was light, but the laugh that followed was touched with a note of hardness strange to her.

"I thought I'd tell you that Cousin Ralph has decided not to stay to lunch."

"*Cousin* Ralph?" Deirdre turned, shading her eyes with her hand. "That means, I suppose, that you've quarreled?"

She studied Hyacinth's flushed cheeks and air of triumph with inward misgivings.

"I'm sick of Ralph!" the girl flashed back. "A boy who pretends to be a man!" She pushed Olga away from her side. "No, you're *not* to lick my boots! D'you hear, Olga?" She stamped her foot. "You're like Ralph, intolerably meek, and won't take 'no' for an answer. You think that's the way to make me love you? You're a fool then for your pains!"

The graceful creature slunk away with an upward glance of mute reproach.

Hyacinth, unrelenting, flung herself down upon the sofa and dragged off her hat with a reckless gesture.

"There—that's better—my head aches. I don't think Ralph will try again. I told him the truth—that I loved Chris."

"You *didn't*?" Deirdre rose to her feet, aghast at this new indiscretion, staring down at the childish face, utterly impenitent, beautiful even in its anger.

"Well, why not? You like the truth. At least you've often told me so. Besides that, he tried to kiss me." Her voice shook. "That was the *limit*!"

Her temper ran down on the last word and flickered out into mischief.

"I wish you could have seen his face! He looked as though he'd swallowed the moon. Then he began to lecture me, just as if I were a child, and wound up by

abusing Rollo. Called him a 'brilliant sophist.' What is a sophist? Of course, I knew it was something hateful from his voice. But I can't get nearer than Sophocles." She wrinkled her brows in perplexity.

Deirdre could have shaken her. She realised the consequences of Hyacinth's impulsive folly—the secret, so jealously guarded, flung in a moment of temper into the face of a wounded and indignant youth, with the added sting of rivalry.

"Olga and Ralph suffer alike the penalty of loving you." Her voice was dry purposely.

"I didn't ask them to," said the girl. "They can neither of them take a hint! Rollo says there ought to be another commandment on that point. But that Moses thought it wiser not. He'd suffered from them all his life—hints, I mean—about Pharaoh's daughter!"

She laughed, pushing back the mass of pale gold hair off her forehead.

"I told Ralph it was a secret. At present," she added carelessly.

"And he promised to keep it?" Deirdre felt a faint sensation of relief.

"Swore by all his naval gods"—Hyacinth was still flip-pant—"Neptune, Nelson," she ticked them off on her long white fingers, "and Patterson! I think that was the name of the man who wrote 'Sea Pie,' wasn't it? Ralph's rather like Aunt Byng when he gets hung up on the family tree; also Absalom!" She giggled. "There are 'things the Mesuriers can't do.' To fall in love is one of them! With a married man—that's understood—or a married woman, I suppose?"

Her eyes, clear and innocent, under their long gold-tipped lashes, met Deirdre's troubled gaze with a shadow of impertinence. "But Rollo and I are different. We're children of liberty!" She laughed with a rising note of excitement. "You can't expect me to be immune from hereditary influences. I'm Rollo's daughter." She nodded her head. "I've been brought up like a gipsy. D'you remember those lines of Chesterton's?" She began to recite them, purposely changing the words to suit her meaning:

"In the heart of the—Weavers' woods, where the eyes of  
the—Byngites burn not,  
And the wild hawk goes before me, being free to return and  
roam,  
The hills have broad untroubled backs and the tree-tops turn not  
To spy on me as I pass, and I know that I'm at home."

"That's my *true* setting—also my parody! With all apology to the man who could think out that gorgeous touch, which seems to glitter with the East: 'Women veiled in the sun or bare as brass in the shadows. And the endless eyeless pattern where each thing seems an eye.' And—oh, yes—d'you remember?" She was off now, caught by the glamour of words—in very truth her "father's daughter." "'Only to walk and walk and stun my soul and amaze it. A day with the stone and the sparrow and every wonderful thing.'"

She glanced up at Deirdre, watching her under frowning brows, and added very sweetly:

"Would you like some more?"

"No, I wouldn't. I'd like to shake you!"

"Do!" The girl leaned forward, half-repentant, half-rebellious. "Good for both of us—I *guess*! Observe my new American accent. I made a man so mad last night—a Mr. Van Pump, I think he was called—by asking him to translate into English a string of compliments. They don't really *like* it, you know, although they say *we* have the accent and that theirs is the pure original brand captured by the Pilgrim Fathers. I think, perhaps, it's like Chianti—can't stand the sea passage. Aunt Byng corrected me. I gather Van Pump is 'some' parti! Oh, Deirdre, I'm mad, but I'm very unhappy—that's the truth!"

Wisely the elder woman took the olive branch outstretched to her.

"Poor child!" She slipped down on the sofa by the culprit's side. "But I don't like to see you heartless. That's not my little Hyacinth."

She drew the slender figure close and at the contact, the sense of comfort, the girl gave a tired sigh and lifted her face for a kiss. "I can't help it"—she clung to Deirdre—"it's not my fault. I want Chris. I feel when

Ralph and other men make love to me that it's an insult. I can't explain, but it hurts my pride. And then it's all so strange in London. Only last night, coming back from Aunt Byng's——" She paused for a moment.

"Yes?" Deirdre prompted softly. "Lord Courthorpe saw you home?"

"No, he didn't; that's just it. He said he would, but on the way he asked us to put him down at his club, somewhere in Pall Mall, so I was left with Reggie Bolsover. And then he thought it would be fun to go on to a place he knew where there was dancing—a sort of club. It was getting late and I told him so. Reggie suggested we could say that Lord Courthorpe had made up a party and taken us off to the *Savoy*. It seemed such a *silly* tale to tell! So I said outright that of course I'd go, as I love dancing, but if I did I shouldn't make a secret of it. That Rollo wouldn't mind at all—there was no need to tell a lie."

"Well?" Deirdre tried to keep an impassive face, but in her heart she was furious with Bolsover. Where and what was this club?

"Then"—Hyacinth looked indignant—"he turned quite huffy and said he'd *thought* I was a 'sport.' What did he mean? I rather liked him before that and I'd told him all about the fun we'd had one night in Madrid, Rollo and I, and he'd roared with laughter! He made me feel as if somehow I wasn't worth talking to—just sat there looking glum until the car stopped at the door."

"I shouldn't worry, dear child. He isn't worth thinking about." Deirdre stroked the golden head lightly pressed against her shoulder. "He had no right to ask you to go alone with him to that dancing-place. He knew that and felt snubbed when you refused to keep it a secret. I'm sorry now I wasn't with you."

For Deirdre had declined Mrs. Byng's invitation, coolly worded, to dine that night, believing that Hyacinth was safe in the masterful hands of her aunt. She felt vexed, too, with Courthorpe, divining that the worldly-wise old peer had left the pair alone to further his matrimonial schemes. The girl's simplicity had saved her



from a compromising situation, but Deirdre guessed that she felt hurt by the soldier's surly attitude.

For youth is haunted by a fear of the opinion of the world, shy in the consciousness that childhood lies so close upon its heels.

"Ralph wouldn't have done that. I hope you didn't wound the boy too cruelly? I knew he loved you. He told me so down at Weavers." Her voice took on a pleading note. "Won't you write to him, Hyacinth? Just a line and make it up. Why didn't he see you home last night?"

Hyacinth smiled, mischievously.

"He wanted to. As a matter of fact, Aunt Byng had arranged it. But then Lord Courthorpe had his car and when we all came out of the door, I just ran away from Ralph and scrambled in after Reggie. For fun!—but they wouldn't let me go. Ralph made rather a scene; and you know what Lord Courthorpe is—he takes everything as a joke—and he simply shouted at the chauffeur: 'Drive ahead!' and there we were—Aunt Byng simply furious!"

She laughed again at the recollection.

"Ralph came round to scold me this morning. That's how the whole thing began. After all, it's too absurd—a cousin is only a sort of brother. I shouldn't dream of marrying him—even if it weren't for Chris. I'd sooner marry Second-Best!"

Deirdre could not help smiling as she thought of that gnarled and earthy creature.

"Then, with such a choice of lovers you can afford to be merciful. Send Ralph a little word of comfort. Now—at once." Her voice was coaxing. "You can use my pen—as a great favour!"

Hyacinth rose unwillingly. But on the way she stooped to press a kiss on the patient head of Olga.

## CHAPTER XXVII

THERE are certain days on which it seems as if some mischievous sprite took hold of the slender fabric of one's existence and pulled it both ways at once.

In the housewife, beset by petty cares smilingly ignored by men—whose steadier machinery of business is subject to ruder jars, but less dependent on the moods of the service employed day by day—a certain fatalism is bred, based on the old superstition that misfortune is apt to be a twin.

November the fifth was a typical instance. The servants overslept themselves and, descending late to scamper through their early duties, developed irritable tempers. The cook, aware of her unscrubbed floor, was tart, and Deirdre had to summon all her tact to avoid a scene. Charles slipped down with a loaded tray and broke a decanter and three glasses, rounding off the tragedy by cutting his thumb on the shattered remains.

Hyacinth had elected to stay in bed for breakfast, pleading fatigue from a lengthy concert overnight. Lisette collapsed with a "*migraine*" and finally the steady prop of the whole house, Day herself, received a fateful telegram, summoning her to her sister's death-bed.

The sick child had passed away on the eve of the new baby's arrival and the gardener's wife had never rallied from the double shock of birth and death.

"I wouldn't go, mum," Day protested, "but there's nobody else. And all those children—with Fred's mother too old to mind them, and half crippled with rheumatics. Somebody's got to lend a hand to see them through the funeral; but I'll not stay longer than I can help—once she's decently put away."

Deirdre, who divined the grief underlying Day's practical manner, was hunting up in the A. B. C. the quickest train to the West.

"Can you be ready in half an hour? Kate must cut you some sandwiches. You had better take my travelling rug—and some brandy. I'll see to everything. Run upstairs now and pack. Poor Day! I'm so sorry."

"That's all right, mum," Day choked. "We all of us have to go some time."

She was off, her lips pressed together, digesting this homely philosophy. With the odd comfort that anger brings in a moment of sorrow, she laid the blame vindictively upon "that Fred."

"Didn't ought to have had another—and him out of work and all! But there—*men* . . .!" She slammed her door, anathematizing the whole sex.

Deirdre saw to the few arrangements, relieved to find that a serious trouble had blotted out the morning's temper and that Kate wore a kindly smile not unmixed with awed triumph.

"I knew that something were coming, mum. I heard the death-knocks in the night and couldn't sleep. That's why we were all a bit late getting up to-day." The last was a veiled apology and Deirdre accepted it, swallowing a desire to laugh.

"I see. Well, accidents will occur—even with alarum clocks! Has Charles returned from the chemist yet?"

"No, mum. Can I be of use?"

"I don't think so, thank you, Kate. You might get a cup of soup. It would warm Day before her journey—there's the mutton broth from last night. By the way, as we're dining out this evening, two of you can get off. You can arrange it among yourselves so long as Lisette is in to dress us."

"Thank you, mum." Kate beamed. She watched Deirdre run upstairs and, still pensive, turned to the loaf, starting on the sandwiches.

"Now I wonder"—she buttered a slice—"just 'ow it's going to end. Charles is certain it's a case of a new mistress at the 'all." She flicked off a knob of butter—"Well—it might be worse for us!" and leaned heavily on the knife. "But then, what about 'er 'usband?" For gossip was rife in the servants' quarters.

"I suppose it means a divorce one day. Weavers

won't take it kindly, and I shall ask for higher wages. One can't be put upon for nothing!"

The unsuspecting heroine of this drama in the "upper circles" had made her way to Hyacinth's room meanwhile and was knocking at the door.

"May I come in for a moment?"

She heard a stir and the sound of a drawer slid sharply into place; then the girl's tardy response:

"Yes, do. Is anything wrong?"

Deirdre entered the room.

"It's poor Day——" she began, and broke off, surprised in turn. Hyacinth's bed was littered with dresses and beside it lay a cabin trunk on which the girl was perched, smiling, still in her dressing-gown.

"Whatever are you doing—packing?"

"Yes." Hyacinth laughed gaily. "Don't look so horrified! I'm putting away a few things I don't want—that's all. This room is so small after Weavers, simply crowded out with clothes, and I thought if I kept this box outside it would give me space to turn round. I haven't a single drawer left in which to put ribbons and laces—let alone love-letters!"

Deirdre felt oddly relieved.

"And you need a big one for those?" She smiled back at the pretty face framed in its ruffled sunny hair which was drawn into two heavy plaits falling over her slender shoulders. "You look like Marguèrite this morning."

"Sitting on my coffer of pearls?" Hyacinth laughed. In the ripple was a faint ring of excitement. Her cheeks were flushed. Shadows lay beneath the over-bright eyes.

Deirdre noted this.

"I hope you were resting?"

"So I was—till a crash sent me flying out of bed and Lisette rushed in to say that Charles had committed suicide in the pantry. Then Day, like a restful spirit, appeared on the scene and corrected the statement—that he'd cut not his throat but his thumb! Lisette looked quite disappointed." She laughed again. "How is the victim?"

"Bearing up with dignity and gone to the chemist to

be bandaged. I was afraid that there might be still a fragment of glass in the cut. Poor Day is in trouble now."

She sat down on the edge of the bed and recounted the latest catastrophe. Then, as Hyacinth sympathized, Deirdre's thoughts went off at a tangent. "You're never going to pack away this?" She lifted the folds of a chiffon dress. "You've only worn it a few times and it will crush horribly."

To her surprise the girl coloured.

"No; it's going back in the drawer. I'm just sorting everything—it's much easier in the end."

"Why don't you let Lisette do it?"

"Because she's simply a wail incarnate—goes about with her hand pressed to her forehead claiming the Almighty. 'Ah—*mon Dieu!*'" Hyacinth mimicked the shrill voice wickedly. "It's bad enough to have toothache oneself without details of her '*migraine!*'"

"Have you toothache? I'm so sorry. Why didn't you tell me before? And you shouldn't be bending over that trunk, sending all the blood to your head. Do get back into bed. I'll soon straighten your room for you."

She began to gather up the dresses.

"No, don't! I'm all right. It does me good to stir about. Thanks awfully all the same. But I've nearly finished—it won't take long. I think it's a new wisdom tooth." She smiled. "That ought to comfort you! Isn't my face a wee bit swollen?"

Deirdre laid down the armful of frocks and crossed to where the victim sat.

"No, I don't think so." She bent nearer. "Is it tender outside?" Gently she passed her fingers down the curve of the smooth velvety cheek where a few faint freckles of summer lingered on the clear and transparent skin.

"A little—nothing to worry about." Hyacinth drew back quickly. "Don't bother about me, but go and look after poor old Day. I shall get up when I've finished this."

"This" looked pretty comprehensive. It seemed to Deirdre that the girl's whole wardrobe was scattered about the room.

"I wish you'd be wise and let me do it." Hyacinth frowned obstinately. "Would you like some menthol to rub on your face? Or is there anything else I can get?"

"Nothing. You're neglecting Day." Deirdre saw it was better to leave her.

"Very well—but I'll come back once I've seen about her cab. You *must* get well for the party to-night! I'm glad Lord Courthorpe arranged dinner instead of supper—it won't be so late—and you've got that dance at the Ritz to-morrow."

"Yes—I suppose so." Hyacinth yawned, stretching her arms above her head. "Pleasure's an exhaustive business—no wonder I'm cutting a wisdom tooth."

"London life is like a fair  
From merry-go-round to show and booth.  
It lines the face and thins the hair—  
No wonder I'm cutting a Wisdom Tooth!"

"There, how's that for impromptu verse? Will you tell Day to come to me before she starts?" Her face went grave. "D'you think, Deirdre, she'd be hurt if I gave her a present or paid her fare?"

"You can try if you like; I'm afraid it's hopeless."

Deirdre lingered at the door.

"I know!" the girl sprang up. On the cabin trunk, forgotten by her in her quick movement, lay a book, vellum-bound, with a gilded lock, screened before by her dressing-gown.

"I'll give her that black coat and skirt that you said was far too old for me! It will just do for the funeral. I'll say that Rollo hated it. You back me up?" She was at the cupboard getting it down and she paused to glance back over her shoulder.

"You think you ought to part with it?" Deirdre was torn asunder between her desire that Day should have it and economy on her charge's behalf. "It's almost new——" she hesitated.

"All the better!" Hyacinth laughed. "It's cheating charity to give a garment already worn out—it should *cover* a multitude of sins, not exhibit them through holes

and patches! Besides, I shan't want it, *now*——" she stopped dead, her back still turned to the waiting figure at the door. "I mean," she spoke hurriedly, "I've got my grey one and my brown—more clothes than I can wear. Hullo, here's a packet of toffee in the pocket—what a find! Walnut toffee, too—Fuller's. Have one?" She wheeled round.

"No, thanks." Deirdre smiled happily. What a mere child it was!

As she turned to go she saw the girl pop a sweet into her mouth, scrunching it like a young squirrel.

"That toothache can't be very bad," she decided as she walked across to warn Day of the time and the present awaiting her.

It provoked a further train of thought: pain, neuritis, Caradoc.

Another letter had reached her that morning, written more firmly, and in ink.

"I find the trains won't land me in town early enough for this company meeting and I must be there—about those shares that fool Gibbs put me into. They've been going down steadily ever since the day I bought them. So I'm coming up to-morrow night and shall sleep at the flat. If you change your mind and can manage lunch after all, ring me up Saturday morning."

Deirdre, reading it, had frowned.

"He thinks all women change their minds! Mark in his attitude towards my sex belongs to purely mediæval days. They would have suited him far better. A wife kept in her 'proper place'—*videlicet*, the Round Tower, patiently adding, stitch by stitch, to her mother-in-law's tapestry the legend of the family prowess and clad in stiff brocaded gowns waiting on her lord at his pleasure—handing him the stirrup cup, and bathing his wounds after battle! The one mild excitement of life watching Mark fly his falcon from a barred window in the tower. Though I doubt," she added thoughtfully, "if he'd run to brocade; more likely insist on my weaving my own garments myself. He would 'put his foot down' at that, a superfluous extravagance."

She drove Day to Paddington and contrived in the bus-

tle of the station to buy her ticket and pay for it, before the maid guessed her intention.

"We can settle up on your return. Send me a line when you have time."

She stood there watching the train puff out with an odd pang of loneliness. To-morrow would mean so much to her. She would miss Day's comforting voice, her silent help and sympathy, on her return from the interview. For Deirdre foresaw a fight before the last link was snapped. She had no fear of Mark's temper, yet the situation would play on her nerves.

At last she knew her own mind. She would never go back to her husband. And this meant farewell to Rollo.

Turning away from the long platform she remembered a list, that lay in her bag, of groceries and household sundries she had promised to order at the stores. So she crossed to the Underground and was swiftly carried to Victoria.

She made her way through that labyrinth of departments and was cutting across a section devoted to saddlery when a voice hailed her shrilly by name. She turned. It was Mrs. Hardwick.

So far fate had favoured her singularly in avoiding those friends and acquaintances of the old life with whom explanations might have been awkward. But this time there was no escape. The well-dressed handsome woman with her henna-tinted glossy hair advanced smiling, hand outstretched.

"What a surprise! I suppose you're up for the day—shopping—from the country?"

Deirdre let the suggestion pass. She knew that the speaker rarely waited for an answer to her volley of questions.

"And how *charming* you are looking! Tell me—how is your poor husband? He dined with us a fortnight ago; so sad—that dreadful neuritis! And he seemed so flourishing at Touquet, quite the life and soul of the party. We all hoped that you would come. But perhaps you were wise—dreading the sea! We had a perfectly *awful* crossing. I tried 'Stickit'—that new thing—but it



wasn't any earthly use. I wish they'd build the Channel Tunnel. It's one of those remedies, my dear, that cure *every one* but oneself! Although I shouldn't have stooped to drugs, with my belief in Christian Science. Which reminds me, have you been to that place in Mount Street where they undertake to reduce your weight in a fortnight by means of their artificial horses?"

She paused for breath and Deirdre laughed.

"No, I've never heard of it." Off went Mrs. Hardwick again.

"It's wonderful—but such a sight! All those painfully fat people being jolted up and down in saddles worked by machinery. You trot, canter—*la haute école!*—and come away simply *aching!* But there's nothing like it, the doctors say. Of course a perfectly *natural* cure! But now I'm going in for riding. A friend of ours has just become the M. F. H. of the East Down Harriers and I hope to hunt with them next season. I'm here to-day about a saddle—a new one—and a kind man has promised to meet me and proffer advice. Such a wonderful place—the Stores! One always runs across friends. Oh, my dear, I must tell you," she saw Deirdre glance at the clock and laid a delicately-gloved hand on the other's arm to delay her, "there was a Swedish woman we met at Touquet—had a villa there—used to bathe—a *divine* figure! Your husband was a great admirer! In fact I think she left him her cook as a *gage d'amour*." She laughed shrilly. "And one day we were talking about London shops and I mentioned the Stores—she'd never been here—and she said, looking rather scandalised: 'Oh, that's an improper place—not so? Where your married ladies meet their lovers.' Of course I simply screamed with laughter—the poor dear respectable Stores posing as a 'rendezvous'! So I asked her where she got the impression and she answered, 'From your English novels. It's always there that the heroine and hero arrange their elopement. I thought it was not *comme il faut* to be seen there by oneself?'"

"So I'm really saving your reputation?" Deirdre suggested smoothly. "I'm afraid I shall have to desert you, though, as my shopping list is woefully long."

She held it up as an excuse. But Mrs. Hardwick had no idea of taking a hint. Like Moses, she found ten commandments more than enough!

"Oh, don't go for a minute; it's so long since we met. You're looking so well—I can't believe you're in the country for your health?"

So this was Mark's subterfuge to account for her absence, Deirdre thought.

"A quiet life suits me best." She resented the need for equivocation but feared Mrs. Hardwick's reckless tongue.

"And your poor husband a bachelor! We do our best to cheer him up." There was faint malice in her eyes, closely set, of a hazel hue. "He tells us he's painting your pretty flat to welcome you home when the doctor allows it. Madame Svendson—his Swedish friend—helped him in the choice of papers. She's at Bath now, for a cure, but returns to London in time for Christmas. You will have to be careful bye and bye that they don't meet at the Stores!" Again her artificial laugh rang through the long room. "But you're far too clever to be jealous! How is the writing—I mean the painting? I *envy* you—such a great talent! I suppose you have time for it in the country?"

Deirdre was getting desperate.

"Don't talk about time! I must fly——" She held out her hand. Mrs. Hardwick had raised the lorgnette which she wore on a jewelled platinum chain, and was peering beyond her towards the door.

"*Must* you? Which way d'you go?" Cleverly she steered her victim, still talking, towards the entrance facing the one she had scrutinised.

Deirdre, thankful to escape, submitted to these open tactics; but once she had reached the next department and Mrs. Hardwick had clasped her hand fervently, assured her again how "young she looked" and wished her good-bye, she gave reins to her curiosity and, making a tour of the narrow room, paused again on the threshold of the one she had been driven from.

She could see in the distance Mrs. Hardwick advancing to meet a tall man who stood examining a saddle

with an air of indifference. It was Captain Meredith!—the husband of Deirdre's dearest friend.

A wave of anger flooded her. Here was a man whom all the world recognised as a bad husband, only saved from certain divorce by his wife's devotion to her children and her fear that this might shadow their lives. For Laura had talked it over with her barely ten days since, thankful to find one faithful friend to whom she could unbosom her troubles.

What was the use of being faithful?

Laura had merited the best that life could offer to a woman and had reaped neglect and constant insult together with the amused contempt of the class to which Mrs. Hardwick belonged.

Here was a pregnant instance of that which befell a wife who placed duty before pride and egotism, suffered in silence—and closed her eyes to the sign-post pointing the path to freedom!

Was it worth such a sacrifice?—when the real culprit escaped scot free, was welcomed, fêted and forgiven!

The hint of gossip so shrewdly conveyed concerning Mark and his Swedish "friend" rankled now in Deirdre's mind. It added to her determination. Her husband would soon console himself! A bitter smile curved her lips. Mark would be free to indulge his fancy for a pretty face and pass on as soon as satiety claimed him. Whilst she, herself? She shrugged her shoulders, knowing that little leniency would be shown to the conduct of the wife.

Society was mediæval, too, allowing all licence to the man, but shrewd to detect feminine weakness. For the law of England was man-made—in man's interest from start to finish!

Would her sex's revolt, already at work in a thousand ways, ever result in a new overwhelming weight of opinion to balance the tampered scales of justice?

Dimly she tried to pierce the future and see a world where women worked and earned an equal wage with men: were independent, owing nothing, free and able to choose their mates on the terms of frank co-partnership; where love did not enter into the bargain as the price of a woman's daily keep, but became a gift to be

withheld or offered in freedom of soul and body.

Did the storm, now rolling up to relieve the tension of the air—this feminist movement oftentimes weakened by merely hysterical demonstrations—mean the dawn of a golden day for womanhood, the world at last awake to the fact that the mothers of men deserved an equal recognition?

Her eyes shone at the stirring thought. Herself a rebel to the core, she marched on, head high, unconscious of admiring glances.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

SHE arrived home late for lunch to find Hyacinth languidly facing a basin of bread and milk.

"My poor child!" Deirdre viewed this change in the menu with compassion. "Don't tell me that your toothache's worse?"

"Much—and I don't feel any wiser!" The girl bravely tried to joke. "Still it enlarges one's sympathies. I know now what babies suffer! I'm devoutly thankful that all one's bones don't develop in the same way! Fancy the agony of waiting to 'cut' an elbow, or a knee—to feel them throbbing into place!" She gave an uncertain little laugh. "Sit down and have some lunch. It will do me good to see you eat!"

Charles came in with the hot dish, his hand bandaged, and Hyacinth smiled as the door closed on his solemn face.

"Poor Charles has been 'cutting a thumb'—I don't wonder he looks ill-used. This place is fast becoming a crèche! Now give me all your news. Where have you been and whom have you met?"

Deirdre guessed that the girl wished to shelve the discussion of her ailment.

"I packed Day off to Devonshire—she was so grateful for your dress—then went to the Stores, did some shopping and met a woman I dislike. A typical social butterfly—artificial to the core. That's my news, in tabloid form, and I think I deserve a glass of wine!" She poured it out as she spoke. "It's quite refreshing to look at you after that meretricious beauty."

"Must have been a 'Painted Lady'; it's a common genus of butterfly—the sort that Reggie Bolsover would be after with his little net! Which reminds me—I've rung them up and said I wouldn't go to-night. I caught Lord Courthorpe at his club and he said he could *hear* my tooth gnashing! He was really awfully nice about

it, is taking his niece in my place and looking forward to seeing you." Hyacinth smiled very sweetly.

"Oh, what a pity! Why didn't you try to get me out of it as well? I'd far rather remain with you." Deirdre looked taken aback.

"Why? I shall go to bed early, and I didn't want you to miss the fun. That's why I fixed it all up while you were out." She nodded wisely.

"I wish you had waited." Deirdre sighed. "Still I quite understand, my dear, that you didn't feel up to a long evening. Do you think we had better go to the dentist this afternoon and ask his advice?"

"In my pram, with my rattle?" Hyacinth became flippant. "No, of course not. I'm all right. But I think we'll cut those two 'At Homes' and settle down to a good read over the fire—with some buttered toast—and say we're out to all the world."

"Yes, it sounds nice and cosy. And the new books have come from Mudie's."

With the knowledge of what lay before her the next day, Deirdre welcomed a quiet afternoon, and they spent it very happily with the added joy of discovering later that Mrs. Byng had been one of the callers, politely turned away by Charles.

At last Deirdre left the girl, absorbed in her book, and went upstairs to dress for the early dinner. When she came down she paused for a moment and peered through the open drawing room door.

Hyacinth was leaning back, her hands clasped behind her head, lost in day-dreams sweet but sad, as the curves of her mouth testified. A sudden pity flooded the heart of the older woman. She guessed full well that the girl was thinking of her lover—the absent, un-forgotten Chris.

She came in quietly and bent over the dreamer.

"Is the toothache any better?"

"Yes—no!" Hyacinth jumped. "I didn't hear you. How nice you look!" Her voice was wistful; tears were not far from the beautiful blue-green eyes. "Deirdre—are you fond of me?"

"Fancy asking such a question!" Mrs. Caradoc

stooped and kissed her. "You know I am. I've a great mind to throw over this party now."

"Oh, you mustn't!" A look of alarm succeeded the girl's mournful smile. "It wouldn't do—they'd be offended—and I don't mind being alone." She curled herself sideways in her chair, and glanced over Deirdre's dress.

"I wish you'd wear my pearls to-night. Do?" She unclasped the shining row that hung in a loop from the slender neck. "I'd like you to keep them—if you will. They're mine to give, they were Grandmamma's." She fastened them round her friend's throat. "Some day—when I'm not here—you can use them as a rosary. Not for prayer"—she shivered slightly—"just loving thoughts . . . from Hyacinth."

"Darling, I couldn't!" Deirdre smiled lovingly. "They're far too precious." She fingered the beautiful even string, each pearl perfectly matched both in size and quality; then, seeing the girl draw back, childishly disappointed, "But if you like I'll borrow them, just for to-night and be a fine lady!"

"Yes." Hyacinth wound her arms tightly round the bare neck, still youthful, white and smooth, of this tenderest of chaperons.

"You ought to be off——" her voice faltered. "Kiss me!"

Deirdre felt her lips pressed with almost passionate fervour and responded gladly; for of late a little coolness had lain between them.

The girl drew back with a deep sigh which was perilously near to a sob.

"How silly I am!" She sprang to her feet and brushed a hand across her eyes. "I've been reading a horribly morbid book and I think it's got upon my nerves. Plus toothache!" She smiled wanly. "Now off you go and have a good time—there's the taxi at the door. Give my love to Lord Courthorpe and—don't be *too* nice to Reggie!"

"I certainly shan't!" Deirdre nodded. "I don't care for that young man. Now mind you go to bed early. I simply hate leaving you!"

The party fell rather flat. At least, so it seemed to Deirdre. The dinner, rushed through at top speed to allow of innumerable rich courses, had been delayed by Reggie's sister who arrived late—and unrepentant!

Bolsover was plainly bored and his uncle's heavy galantries aimed at Deirdre under the eyes of the supercilious younger pair became each moment harder to bear. "Clorinda's Curls," as a play, fulfilled the inanity of the title and during the lengthy interval the younger man slipped away, returning late in the second act, a minute after the audience acclaimed the re-appearance of his charmer. This coincidence ruffled the host and was challenged by the delinquent's sister and Deirdre felt that subtle discomfort which comes from sharing a family secret.

She was thankful when the frayed ends of the oft-times mislaid and impossible plot were drawn together triumphantly in a swaying, shouting Bridal Chorus. The favourite, wreathed in orange blossoms, supported by the hoarse tenor and the comic man of the piece, smiled once more before the curtain with a last flash of the famous teeth and the audience rose to fight their way towards the next entertainment—supper. Courthorpe saw Deirdre home, tired and a little distraught; for which—had he known it—his guest was thankful, but delivered a last compliment gallantly upon the doorstep.

With a sigh of relief she let herself in and mounted the steep stairs on tiptoe.

Mindful of the maid's headache, she had told Lisette to go to bed, and nobody was sitting up—the shadowy house wrapped in slumber. Outside Hyacinth's door she paused and listened a shade anxiously.

"Asleep, I hope." She passed on and entered the adjoining room.

Slipping out of her opera cloak she stood for a moment before the glass admiring the beautiful rope of pearls offered her by the generous girl. Then her eyes fell on a letter propped against a trinket box. She tore it open hastily. A look of horror succeeded the tired but tranquil expression of her face.



For Hyacinth wrote in her square bold hand :

"Deirdre, dear :

"When you find this I shall be upon the sea, leaving you, although I love you, for one who means still more to me.

"Will you ever forgive me, I wonder?—and believe that I *hated* deceiving you!

"Dear, it was the only way. I couldn't bear it any longer. It's always been Rollo that's stopped me before, but now that I know that you care for him and that he loves you, the last link's snapped. Be good to him—you're all his world! At times I've been a little jealous. Rollo used to be wholly mine. But now I see it is all for the best; one of 'Nature's compensations.'

"Chris needs me more than Rollo—all alone, misunderstood, eating his heart out at Puy. I simply cannot live without him.

"And why should I? Life's so short and all this shadow-dance in town is a sheer waste of happiness. That clever Frenchman spoke the truth: Remorse is better than vain regret!

"It's no use your following us; just stay and look after Rollo. We shall leave Puy immediately for a land of sunshine and sapphire skies—Spain, Morocco, *chi lo sa?*—the true setting for our love.

"Deirdre, dear, think of me as *happy*—at last fulfilling myself. And tell Rollo not to grieve—to practise his philosophy: see that it all falls into the picture, a part of our old gipsy life of open air and candid thought, supreme scorn of the world's opinion and faith in the guiding hand of Nature. For why should Chris suffer still from a dead impulse of quixotry? His marriage was never more than a chain locked by a tyrant round his feet. Love has no use for rusty fetters. It lies beyond the law's pretensions—in itself a gift, not a wage—freely offered, freely shared.

"The only regret I feel now is for this last day—deceiving you. I never had toothache—invented it as an excuse to stay behind. I feel ashamed in confessing this, but I'd rather you knew the whole truth.

"I shan't write to Rollo yet. I give him to you with both my hands. Comfort him. I know you can! He worships you as his guiding star.

"*Please*, Deirdre, keep those pearls—my last gift. Do they mean tears? Perhaps. . . . But tears may come from joy as well as from a sense of sorrow.

"Some day try and forgive your little friend who runs away yet leaves a corner of her heart behind—for you!"  
"HYACINTH."

"P. S.: I told the servants that I was travelling by the late train down to Weavers! I had a telegram from Ralph begging my pardon for something he'd said and pretended that it came from Rollo. I thought it would make your way smoother."

Stunned by the shock, Deirdre walked slowly across to the girl's room and turned on the electric light.

There lay the dainty bed—untouched! Upon the floor tissue paper was strewn around the empty space lately filled by the cabin trunk.

All the beautiful tortoise-shell fittings with their fine gold monograms had vanished from the dressing-table and the wardrobe gaped, shorn of dresses.

It was true, then: she had gone!

The tired woman sank on a chair where a pair of silk stockings dangled, disconsolate and overlooked, and buried her face in her hands.

In that still hour when the weary Earth seems to pause upon her axle and dying men flicker out, when human vitality ebbs low and despair rules the sleepless brain, Deirdre saw no glimmer of light; but failure—failure everywhere. . . .

At last she raised her tear-stained face. She must stir herself—awake to action.

Flung down, half open, on the writing-table was a Bradshaw. The sight brought her to her senses. She must follow the girl, at all costs; wire Rollo—a hundred things!

She went across to the washing stand, filled the basin with cold water and dipped her face deep in it to dispel

this dull drowsiness. She rubbed her cheeks with the hard towel, shivering still from the icy impact, and gathering up the railway guide, she went back to her own room. Here shedding her finery, wrapped in a warm dressing-gown, she looked up the boat train. Only two; night and morning. She must catch the one at ten next day.

She wrote out a telegram to the Squire, wording it carefully, with a knowledge of the village gossip.

"Going Dieppe morning boat please call Deanery Street for letter as soon as you reach town."

Rollo would read between the lines and follow her in hot haste. Purposely she omitted to sign it. She turned up the Weavers train once more. No—impossible! Even by motor he could not arrive in time to join in her swift pursuit.

Then she settled down to the letter, accusing herself of negligence: the half-packed box, Hyacinth's tears—Why had she not divined the truth? At last it was done and the girl's enclosed. She sealed it, using a signet ring on which was engraved Caradoc's crest; and suddenly she remembered her husband and the interview fixed for to-morrow!

Well—she must telephone to him. Despite the cloud that hung over her she had a fugitive sense of respite. Another day! It seemed to draw her, nearer once more to the man she loved.

Finally she packed a bag with the few things she would require and set the little alarum clock for six, with a smile as she saw the time.

Sleep, evading her at first, fell on her spirit before dawn; a dreamless sleep from which she awoke startled by the whirring bell.

For a moment she lay there, wondering.

Where was Day? It was still dark. Then memory returned and she flung back the eider down. Bravely she faced a cold bath, dressed herself in quiet clothes and caught one of the first busses which set her down at Charing Cross. She sent off the telegram, and, freshened by the frosty air, went into the station buffet and drank a scalding cup of coffee.

By the time she returned to Deanery Street the household was astir. Charles, in shirt-sleeves, stared at her when she ordered breakfast for eight o'clock. She offered no explanations. Lisette was voluble and suspicious. She tried to detain Deirdre with the account of her young mistress' hurried departure overnight.

"I know. She left a note for me." Deirdre cut her short. "Also the wire from Mr. Mesurier. He will probably be here this morning."

Satisfied, later on, that the servants had sat down to breakfast, she went to the telephone and called up Caradoc.

A sleepy voice came back to her: "Yes. Well? *Who* is it?"

"It's Deirdre. I'm extremely sorry, but I can't come to the flat to-day."

"Oh!" She heard his annoyed grunt and pictured the handsome darkening face. "Why not? What's happened?"

"I have to go out of town."

"Where to?" He spoke sharply.

She hesitated; then made up her mind.

"To Dieppe, by the morning boat, on business concerning the Mesuriers."

"But I've come up purposely to meet you. I thought you meant what you said!" The typical, offensive remark stung her into instant revolt.

"Naturally. I do still. I can't explain on the telephone, but I'm bound to go. It's my plain duty. I will write to you on my return."

"You're taking Day?" It seemed to her that the question rang with suspicion.

"No." She disdained explanation.

"I should like to know your address. Unless this charming mystery——"

She cut him short, at the end of her patience. "It's '*Château de Puy*.'" and rang off.

At half-past nine she was in the cab, leaving strict injunctions to Charles to deliver her letter to the Squire.

"I am going down to Weavers now, but I may miss

him on the way. I shan't be back to sleep to-night. Tell the driver St. Pancras."

At the corner of North Audley Street she leaned out of the taxi window.

"Did he say St. Pancras? I thought so. How stupid! It's Charing Cross."

"Right, mum." The chauffeur grinned and wheeled round in the proper direction.

At last she was settled in the train with her primitive luggage and travelling rug, staring down at the morning paper, her mind too busy to take in the print.

So the long day wore on. The crossing was rough, but Deirdre, a good sailor, remained on deck, battling with the rising wind. Instinctively her spirits lightened, braced by the air stung with salt from the great rollers churning up, white horses on their crests. She thought once of Mrs. Hardwick and the famous "Stickit"—infallible cure that could not prevent a sickly hue from invading that well-preserved face—and laughed aloud. A sailor, passing, glanced at her approvingly as he hurried along, basin in hand, to earn a well-deserved tip!

Slowly the land came into sight and the sea grew smoother as they swung into the protected harbour with the quaint old town on either hand. It wore the cold deserted look of a holiday place out of season—a mere junction now for Paris—shorn of its bathers and fisherwomen.

She got through the Customs quickly and peered round for a Puy bus. The porter explained that out of the season it only met the boat when ordered. He bundled her into a rattling *fiacre*, and they started over the cobblestones and across the long wind-swept bridge towards the outskirts of the town.

All the way, up the zig-zag hill and along the open road on the cliffs, where the full force of the gale reached them, Deirdre anxiously watched the few and slow conveyances they met. Was she too late? Had the lovers started?

When the sea was blotted out on their left and the bare withered fields gave place to a wooded valley, Deirdre thought, for the first time, of her appearance. She

drew out the mirror that formed a part of her hand-bag, and smoothed back her hair, in the quiet of the sheltered lane, tying her motor veil anew. Villas now were scattered about, most of them with that dead look which the tightly closed green shutters impose upon a deserted dwelling.

At last they came to the little bay, with its shingly beach, and, perched above, the huge hotel, devoid of life, like a stranded monster cast up by the sea. The driver noisily cracked his whip and swerved round the curve at the entrance, bringing his pair of ponies back on their haunches at the closed door.

Deirdre got down, glad to stretch her cramped limbs, and made her way to the bureau.

"I want a room." She glanced up and saw a telegram in the rack. "Is that for me—Mrs. Caradoc?"

"*Oui, Madame.*" A sleepy clerk reached it down and pushed forward a heavy book. "Will you sign your name?"

He reserved the wire until she had done so. She broke it open eagerly.

"Coming over by night boat—don't fret—love.

"ROLLO."

The relief of it sent the blood to her cheeks. She looked up, her eyes shining.

"I shall want two rooms. Will you see to my luggage? I have to call on a friend in the village, but shall be back in time for dinner."

"Would Madame like the first floor? We only keep a single wing open during the Winter months. There are two good rooms facing south."

"Those will do." She turned to go. "Where is the Villa Nicolette?"

The clerk instructed her, with a smile which broadened as she left the hall.

"*Tiens!* He watched her run down the steps, his Gallic heart alive to adventure. "*Encore une belle dame qui demande Monsieur Pontefrac'!*"

## CHAPTER XXIX

THE Villa Nicolette stood back from the main road up a steep bank where the withered grass lay, long and rank, and a pair of poplars, grotesquely clipped, waved bare stumps against the sky.

Deirdre, summoning all her courage, rang the bell after some search in the tangled and neglected creeper, which hung in festoons from the verandah and added to the general air of decay and wintry desolation.

Pontefract answered it himself. "Oh, it's you! Will you come in?" He stood aside for her to pass.

The visitor, plainly nervous, followed him into the sitting-room with a comprehensive glance around that untidy little den, poorly furnished, the drab walls covered with old sporting prints; the table—which filled the greater part—littered with books and comic papers, pipes and a mass of fishing tackle.

Here was no dainty nest for a bride, but a bachelor's undusted sanctum.

"Won't you sit down?" He gathered up an oil-skin thrown across a chair and pushed it towards Deirdre.

"No, thanks." She stood there rigid. "Where is Hyacinth?" she demanded.

"Quite safe." His voice was abrupt.

"I should like to see her."

"Afraid you can't." He leant up against the fireplace, looking down at Deirdre with his hazel eyes, in which lurked amusement tinged with an odd pity.

"Look here, Mrs. Caradoc, don't run away with a false idea. You must understand. She is safe—as safe as when she left your care."

"You mean that?" Her heart was beating rapidly with fear and hope.

"On my honour." His face was grim. "I say!" He sprang forward and caught her with an outstretched arm, as he saw her sway upon her feet. "Damn! I

mean I'm awfully sorry. Sit there—I'll get you a drink."

He had steered her into the arm-chair and crossed the room towards a cupboard, from which he produced a bottle and glass before she had realised her collapse.

"It's nothing." She pulled herself together. "I felt giddy—the crossing perhaps." But she drank the rather acrid wine, which he offered her, thankfully.

"I'm sorry I've run out of brandy." Pontefract was apologetic. He saw that her colour had returned and proceeded further to ease her mind.

"About Hyacinth, you know. She turned up here in the dead of night. I'd no more idea that she was coming than the man in the moon. You believe that?"

"Yes." She gave him a grave smile.

"Thanks. You see, I promised Rollo to hold no form of communication with her for the next three months. You might have knocked me down with a feather! Luckily I'm here alone—no servant—just grubbing along. So no one knows except ourselves, and, I suppose, Rollo by now?"

"Yes. He's coming—the night boat."

"Good Lord!" Pontefract groaned. His face was certainly not that of a happy and triumphant lover. It was heavily lined, as if with pain.

Deirdre was recovering fast from her first shock of relief and wonder. The interview was so unlike all she had pictured and rehearsed.

"Hadn't I better see her?" she asked.

He shook his head with the hopeless shrug of the broad and finely-balanced shoulders.

"I promised Hyacinth that you shouldn't. If you came! She didn't believe you would. But I quite expected you to follow, hot foot and full of rage"—he gave a slow, sardonic smile—"and wrest her away from the villain!"

Then, catching her quick glance, pitiful and understanding, he broke out impulsively:

"I say, will you help me? I'm in the devil of a mess!"

"Tell me everything, and I will, if I possibly can."

"Well, it's like this." He drew up another chair, and, straddling it, leaned forward, his arms folded on the



back, his dark face thrust towards her, the brows meeting in a frown.

"I meant to play fair. I swore to Rollo I'd let her alone for the stated time. After that it's my own business. Meg can divorce me. (I'll see she does!) Then my poor little girl turns up, upsetting the whole apple-cart!" He gulped down something in his throat. "Lord! It's been jolly hard to resist her, without breaking her heart as well! But the fact is"—a dull flush showed through the bronze of his skin—"I'm altogether too fond of her to let her ruin herself for me. *I couldn't!* She doesn't understand. Not fair play—a child like that! She'd have the whole world against her. I've never believed in all that bosh that Rollo spouts about convention and 'making one's own rules of life.' It's a theory that won't wash! So long as we could keep it secret it didn't seem to matter much, though I'll own it was pretty dangerous! But a public scandal—to take her away, as she begs, on an endless honeymoon? I'd be a brute to trade upon her childish generosity."

He passed a hand across his forehead.

"She'll have to go back. It's a dead cert—and the hardest nut I've ever cracked."

"Bless you!" Deirdre leaned forward and caught him by his tense arm. "D'you know what I think? You're worthy of her." Tears were standing in her eyes.

"Oh, I don't know about that. I don't set up to be a saint!" He looked thoroughly ashamed, as only an Englishman can, of virtue. "It seems a matter of common sense—just looking ahead, and all that."

"Mind you"—his voice held a vibrant note—"I don't make promises for the future. My notion is to get divorced—on a trumped-up story—as soon as I can. Then go out to the Colonies and buy a farm—I've been saving up—and as soon as I see my way clear, come home and marry her. That is, if she'll wait for me," he added somewhat gloomily. "The trouble is, just now, that the child feels she has burnt her boats and that I hang back—that I don't love her. Lord!—it's been . . . damnable!"

"To soothe her down, I promised her that if you came

(she swore you wouldn't!) you weren't to see her. She's happier since. But she vows she'll never return to Weavers." He rose, restless, to his feet. "I wish to God that Rollo were here, now, and would take her straight away. It's been a bit trying, you know, having her here all to myself and playing the part of heavy parent. Too much like the real thing!"

"A cruel test." Deirdre nodded. "Some day she'll understand, and *then*"—her face expressed her meaning—"I don't think you need fear that the Squire will misjudge the present position. He's not lacking in generosity! Of course, she'll have to go back with him. But perhaps——" She paused. The door behind was swung open. Hyacinth stood there.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes brilliant; she carried her head very high.

She went straight across to her lover and leaned up against his shoulder, defiantly, with an air of possession, as though to claim him before the world.

"Chris prophesied you would come." She addressed Deirdre hardily. "But *I* thought you were my *friend*. I see now I was mistaken." She chose her words with precise care. "Perhaps Rollo sent you here?" She gave a short, scornful laugh. "You ought to be more sympathetic—with your own secret love affair."

Deirdre, taken aback by this most unexpected onslaught, stared at the beautiful angry girl in silence.

Said Hyacinth:

"Do you think I am blind? That I haven't seen *you and Rollo?*" Chris stared, himself amazed at the unexpected turn of affairs. The girl went on: "And *you're* married—older, too, by far, than Chris; with a husband who loves you—believes in you! Yet you come here to lay down the law and forbid us our chance of happiness."

Her clear young voice rang with contempt. For the girl was wounded to the core by the failure of her cherished plans—this strange unwillingness on the part of Chris to run away with her—and the last drop in her cup of sorrow and childish humiliation was the presence of another woman to witness her discomfiture.

But Deirdre could not stand unmoved this open chal-

lence to her pride. She rose to her feet, confronting the girl.

"You have no right to speak like that—purposely contorting facts." She tried to control her rising temper, but her blue eyes cried it aloud. "You're judging me by your own standard. If you've guessed so much you might at least have guessed the truth—the whole truth. I love Rollo with all my heart." Chris marvelled at her courage. "And I'm not ashamed to tell you so, because I know that my conscience is clear. I had left my husband long before I met either of you at Weavers, through his own fault and with his knowledge, and now—if I can—I am going to make the separation a legal one. But when I do"—her voice grew dull—"I shall never see your father again. That is the difference between my love and yours—it includes self-respect."

Hyacinth bit her lip. Temper could not blind her eyes to the other's quiet dignity, nor warp her reason at this juncture. Moreover, dimly, she saw the gulf that lay between their characters.

"Oh, well"—she felt her lover press her arm warningly—"in any case I've been loyal to you." Desperately she changed her tactics. "I might have made things difficult . . . but I didn't . . . and"—her mouth quivered—"I wanted you . . . to be happy, too. I told you so . . . in . . . my letter." She twisted round with a little sob and buried her face on her lover's shoulder. "Chris!" Her arms stole round his neck.

Deirdre's anger evaporated at the sight of the child's unhappiness.

"Hyacinth!" Her voice was gentle, but the girl only clung the closer to the troubled man, who bent his head and kissed the cheek salt with tears.

He dared not interfere in the matter, torn between his passionate love and a man's discomfort at feminine wrangles. Moreover, he still felt amazed by Hyacinth's significant speech. Was there a secret understanding between the Hall and Four Corners?

Deirdre moved towards the door, but on the threshold paused again.

"Hyacinth! I didn't mean to wound you, child. I

*had* to speak! Don't turn away from me." Unconsciously she held out her arms. "I'll forgive you all you said just now. Of course, you *couldn't* understand."

Then, as the girl gave no sign, Deirdre, as a last chance, questioned the face of the man.

Pontefract shook his head. His lips framed the word "Rollo." Here was their only hope. His glance travelled on to the clock.

She went out, groping her way down the narrow passage that smelt of smoke into the dusk of the Winter evening; seeing still before her eyes the young couple so deeply in love: the man's face wracked with passion and the bent, despairing, golden head.

Life was an endlessly cruel affair. She clasped her hands tightly together, and, as if in mockery of her pain, a speech of Rollo's recurred to her.

"I've never denied her anything that wasn't against the laws of health."

And her own reply, strangely prophetic:

"But some day she must learn denial. It can't be roses all the way."

She saw again her lover's face, with the old enthusiastic light, and heard his voice, deep and strong, setting forth his favourite creed:

"It ought to be. It's man's fault if he chooses to gather only the thorns."

"Chooses!" It seemed in the darkening light as though a phantom of Summer days rose up and laughed at her.

Before she mounted the hotel steps she turned for a moment and looked at the sea. A dark and angry bank of clouds was blotting out the primrose light left behind by the sunset. The water, iron-grey, was flecked with silvery crests and the waves broke vindictively upon the beach to grind back over loosened shingle. Far away towards Dieppe lights twinkled from hidden masts and the wind came scuttling along the cliffs as though it fled before the storm.

"Rollo will have a rough passage; but he'll like that—it will fit his mood. I must go and meet him." She gave a sigh of relief. "Thank God, it's better news."

For she felt a deep respect for Chris. He had come safely through the fire, resisting a powerful temptation, upheld by that code which seems to be part of the Englishman's heritage—the ethics known as "fair play."

Practised in every grade of life on the field of games from early school days and adhered to as a fetish, this impulse worthily to accord every chance to an adversary, disdaining the use of trickery, became a habit of the race, unbreakable in the hour of trial. It strengthened the soul of the nation.

Kipling's lines recurred to her on "muddied oaf and flannelled fool," and she felt a quiver of impatience as she passed into the empty hall. If sport could achieve this self-control it was finer than culture as a means to train the young for the battle of life, taking the sting from defeat.

To fight to the last, facing the foe—the thought acted as a tonic. For she herself was fighting hard; the old conflict of flesh and spirit. Was there a virtue, after all, in sacrifice—a power to be gained only at the price of sorrow?

She knew then with a sudden flash of insight—one of those revelations that come from afar like a "still small voice"—that she stood there a finer woman than the one who had fled from suffering to the sanctuary of Four Corners. The consciousness of spiritual gain soothed the trouble of her mind, where Hyacinth's words still rankled, and her strained nerves relaxed their tension. She was "playing fair"—was true to her race. . . .

A buxom French chambermaid greeted her upon the landing, glad of the advent of a guest and the chance of tips in the empty season. With a flourish of keys she opened the door of the room where Deirdre's luggage lay and switched on the electric light, aware of the gloom that shadowed the place.

"Madame would like some hot water?"

"Madame" agreed, with a smile. She would also like to dine in her room. A sleepy waiter came up with the menu.

At last Deirdre was alone. She went across to the open window for another look at the stormy sea and

stepped out on the balcony which commanded the narrow wind-swept bay. But beyond the faint line of the surf and a dark patch of outstanding rocks she could not distinguish water from sky. The November day had slipped into night.

The air was raw, charged with moisture, and she came back into her room, glad to see that the crackling wood in the fireplace was bursting into a flame. As she closed the shutters she saw that a door beyond lay open and peeped through. This was the room reserved for Rollo. For the first time she realised a disturbing feature in the adventure, but thrust the conventional doubt away, sure of herself and of him.

"I can easily bolt the door." She smiled. "And Rollo wouldn't give it a thought! All the rooms in foreign hotels communicate—there's nothing in it!"

The waiter duly appeared with dinner and she realised that she was hungry; glad, too, to taste again that indescribable savoury flavour of which the French hold the secret, even in the simplest dishes. Her spirits rose. She cast from her all memory of the painful scene down at the Villa. Rollo was coming. Rollo would set everything right. Before them lay a few last hours of the old perfect companionship. She re-read his telegram. It was evident that he held her blameless.

She had ordered the omnibus, and as soon as the waiter had cleared away, she slipped into her dressing-gown and lay down on the broad French bed, with its vast *duvet* drawn over her, to steal a few hours of sleep. The logs hissed and sputtered softly with the pungent smell of a wood fire and it blent with the aromatic odour rising from the polished floor. This was France. With all the chill of the sea air and the noise of the waves, she felt miles away from the bleak, silent fogs and depression of town. France—a land of love and sunshine . . . Rollo was coming . . . her eyelids closed and with his name upon her lips she slipped away into dreamless slumber.



## CHAPTER XXX

THE boat came in true to time, despite the gale; for the wind was behind her. Deirdre, leaning over the rope dividing her from the passengers as they hurried forward to the *douane*, felt her heart give a great throb when she saw the well-remembered figure, overcoat flapping loose, bag in hand, pass lightly through the huddled, wretched-looking crowd of commercial travellers and invalids.

She could not catch a glimpse of his face as he strode forward, unconscious of her, bent on getting through the Customs ahead of his bedraggled neighbours. So she made her way back to the bus, fearful of missing him in the scramble, and stood there impatiently, her eyes riveted on the exit.

The first to emerge was a swarthy man with a square-cut beard and excitable air, arguing with a stubborn porter weighed down with a load of boxes in japanned tin and a wicker suit case; then a youth, very pale, with a lady clinging to his arm in a tartan cloak and heavily veiled. Both tottered on their feet. Next two obvious Englishmen, pallid too, but recovering and able to grumble aggressively, with a North-country burr, at the Customs officials. Behind them appeared a clean-cut face, the eyes clear and keen as a hawk's: a tall and energetic figure, shouldering its own portmanteau.

"Rollo!" Deirdre ran forward. She heard his quick exclamation.

"You! How dear of you to come. I never expected you would meet me!"

He lowered his bag to the ground and seized her hands in his warm grasp, smiling gravely down at her, drinking in her excited pleasure.

"Of course! I wanted to tell you at once that it's all right—good news! She's safe—safe in every way." Unconsciously she quoted Chris.

She saw the light flash up in his eyes—relief, wonder, and breathlessly, "I've seen Chris"—she ran on—"it's *not* too late—you understand?"

He nodded, unable to find his voice. Then, with characteristic thoughtfulness, drew her carefully aside out of the stream of passengers, now pouring through the doorway, aware that a porter threatened her with a formidable Saratoga.

A lamp shone overhead, illuminating both their faces; their clasped hands and air of absorption. It looked to the crowd like a lover's meeting. Yet, although each felt sub-consciously the joy of perfect sympathy, their minds for the moment were occupied with the fate of a younger generation.

"Hyacinth doesn't know you're coming—but Chris does. In a way, he's glad. He's a *dear* fellow—true as steel!" She laughed with a faint ring of excitement. "Fancy having the nerve to refuse to run away with the girl you love when everything conspires to make the great adventure a success! And all he says is, 'Not fair play.'"

"By Heaven—he deserves her!" Rollo was moved to his inmost depths. "Dear old Chris." His face softened. "We shall have to find a way for them—somehow—legally. There's no doubting a love like that! It's the real thing—eh, dear heart?" His eyes studied her pretty face, flushed by the wind, and her brilliant eyes. "Blue as violets to-night. There are little rain-drops on your hair. . . ."

Suddenly he glanced behind and realised their isolation. The cabs and buses had swallowed up the passengers. Alone and stranded the *Château de Puy* omnibus stood in their rear, the driver impatient.

"Tell me the rest as we go along." He handed over his portmanteau. "That's all—no heavy luggage!" and helped Deirdre up the step.

Neither of them was aware of a silent witness of their meeting, standing well within the shadows, his cap drawn down over his eyes, coat collar turned up, screening his fair-skinned, handsome face. Against the rough frieze of his ulster a dark triangular patch appeared,



for he carried his right arm in a sling, from which a stiff hand protruded.

He stood there, immovable. Only when the door of the bus had slammed behind Mesurier's back and he had seen the pair inside, facing each other, lean forward to talk once more eagerly as the wheels rumbled over the cobbles, did Carodoc venture forth from his gloomy hiding-place.

His face was mottled red with anger, the eyes congested; his hands shook. He hailed the last remaining *fiacre*, in a voice which made the driver jump, flung his suit case into it and scrambled after:

"Grand Hotel!"

The *cocher* gathered up his horse with reins and whip and grinned to himself. He liked to see an Englishman ruffled by a stormy crossing, the national ice shewing a crack. He, *par exemple*, had a *tempérament*! But just to emphasise the fact of his own birthright—a son of freedom, brotherhood and equality—he shaved the edges of the pavement recklessly as they skirted the market.

Carodoc did not resent it. The wild driving suited his mood; he almost hoped they *would* be smashed! He was muttering now, between his teeth—disjointed words thickened by anger.

"So that's the game! A 'separation'? I'm damned if it won't be a divorce! No wonder she didn't take Day. 'Business'"—he recalled her words—"concerning the Mesuriers." He used an ugly expression here. "I can guess what the business is!"

Thus, torn by his seven devils, he was borne along the deserted front—where no Casino lights beckoned—to the best hotel Dieppe afforded. For even now, tossed by passion, he could afford to study his comfort. Across his wrath, like a gleam of hope, came the memory of a certain wine he had tasted there, on a summer visit.

"Just my luck if there's none left." He caught at his cap as a sudden gust swept across from the open place. "I've *earned* a good drink to-night."

Meanwhile the pair he anathematised had rumbled up

the long hill and were out on the cliff, where the storm howled and rattled against the carriage windows.

Deirdre had eased her mind of much of her burden—the tale was told. She leaned back happily as Rollo tucked the rug around her. “My dear child, I don’t want it! I’m as warm as a toast after my crossing.” For Deirdre had remonstrated at monopolising that hotel treasure. “Luckily I knew the captain—a dear old chap—so I stayed on deck. The rest of the crowd were bundled below, to *lasciare ogni speranza!* I had the whole ship to myself. The waves, too—such beauties! Great monsters rolling up and gnashing their teeth as we plunged along. It’s made another man of me!”

“I hope not.” Deirdre laughed. “I rather liked the old Adam, and I’m not in the mood to meet strangers.”

“Shy?” He flashed her a puckish smile. “Could you, I wonder, be shy with me?”

“No!” But she coloured as she spoke.

Mesurier bent nearer her.

“I’m not so sure.” His voice was low. Then with an effort he drew back.

“When I was a boy”—he spoke lightly—“I used to think that thirty-seven, or forty say, was the open door to old age—decrepitude! That one would settle down, supine, to watching one’s locks turn silvery, and that all the questioning of youth would be answered, one’s doubts shed or settled.

“Yet, here I am, still at a loss why I was born or whither I go—with not one respectable inclination!—still alive to the call of romance, still eager for adventure, young in my inmost heart as ever. The only difference I can discern is a certain reticence of spirit—the endless whys and wherefores sunk in an honest *acceptance* of mystery. I’m still intensely curious”—he spoke simply, watching her face—“but I’m willing to leave it in higher hands: the force that balances the world. Is that a sign of middle-age?” His voice sounded a shade wistful.

“I don’t think so.” She smiled at him. “You’d never be old, in the orthodox sense. Not even as old as I am now!”

"You!" He threw back his head and laughed. "Why, the whole discourse arose from my wonder at the shy charm that still lurks beneath your golden maturity. To me you're just—the perfect flower."

"Of a virtuous life?" She could not resist following up the old tag; for her cheeks were warm with his open praise and she tried to pass it off in laughter.

"Heaven forbid! It sounds terrific."

"Like a first prize at the local flower show? A marrow that measures a foot across! We always get back to gardening, don't we? I wonder why?"

"A throw-back to the garden of Eden. Perhaps we're modern reincarnations of Adam and Eve——" He stopped abruptly, his laughing face clouded over.

"Have you seen Caradoc?"

"No." She divined his train of thought. "The interview was arranged for to-day—yesterday—which is it? I put him off."

A short silence succeeded the words.

Deirdre was trying to muster all her courage to tell the man of her own foregone decision, the bitter parting that lay ahead.

Yet it seemed so cruel to disturb his new-born serenity—the relief he felt concerning his child—that she hesitated, torn asunder.

His watchful eyes were on her face full of a curious speculation. She glanced up wistfully and Mesurier smiled at her.

"Look here, little woman"—he bent forward and lowered his voice—"let's banish all that—just for to-night—and go back again to the old simple days at Weavers. It seems to me that this strange adventure—you and I thrown together for a breathing-space of happiness—has been arranged outside our will. A gift direct from the high gods, a reward perhaps for all we've suffered? Shall we bury the whole problem and be honest lovers—I can't say 'friends'—for a few golden hours of peace? Can you trust me to that extent?"

But Deirdre was thinking hard, her conscience at war with her heart. It seemed as if their rôles were reversed, that now her strength was greater than his.

"It's not a question of trust," she whispered. "But mightn't it be harder . . . after?"

"No." He stooped and, taking her hand, kissed the cold reluctant fingers with a sudden touch of passion. "I love you so." His voice was husky. "Grant me just this little respite. I can't bear to feel that a wall is dividing us——" He broke off and looked at her searchingly. "You don't love Caradoc?"

"No." She met his gaze fully.

"Nor intend to return to him?"

"Never!" Her voice rang firm and true.

"Ah! . . . Thank God. I guessed as much. Then let us take what the kind fates offer. It's all so wonderful to me: you and I alone together, in this dear generous land of France—a night and a day out of prison"—he smiled—"where the turnkey is Mrs. Grundy!"

A sudden sharp volley of rain lashed the windows and he started, staring out into the dark. "Rain!" he laughed. "I knew it was coming—I could feel it beating in my pulses. Oh, you dearest thing on earth, say you'll agree? Come back to me, as you were that wonderful night in the woods, when you held me a moment in your arms. Do you remember, Deirdre?"

"Yes." She was yielding to the spell—the love in his voice, his masterful manner.

"To feel you're mine, and that we are one, the rest of the world filled with shadows; a sense of completion—with one thorn: that it's *almost* happiness—not quite."

He saw her give a little start. The colour sprang up into her face. Now he understood her silence, the shadow of pain in her eyes. He realized that for a moment she had stood upon the perilous brink and gazed down into those depths where honour lies broken, flung by passion.

The wonder of it held him dumb. That a woman of Deirdre's calibre could for a moment contemplate the ultimate sacrifice of her pride, measure it as the price of love, left him stunned and strangely humble. He knew at last that her heart was his.

But he dared not let her guess the truth: that he'd glimpsed her secret. He went on:

"Whatever may happen in the future, we shall have one golden hour to revive. Time cannot cheat us of the past. Say you agree?" His voice pleaded. "Just for to-night and to-morrow to have done with pretence—to admit we're lovers: honest lovers unbound by convention, strong enough to keep the bond a sacred one, that precludes regret. Deirdre, I love you so that if I thought it were better for you that I should leave you now for ever, slip away over the cliff to the last embrace of the 'great white mother,' I believe I could do it willingly.

"But I don't. I *know* that the day will come when a way will be opened out to us."

She could not resist this last request, with the prescience of the pain before him: those days of utter loneliness. Here, as he said, was a moment's respite. How could she have doubted him? She felt ashamed of the dark suspicion and in her relief she held out her hand, like a child confirming a happy bargain.

"Ah!" He gripped it so tight that she flinched. "You blessed creature." His mood changed, the old gaiety bubbling up. "And here we go wasting the precious minutes in labelling obvious facts. Why, the world couldn't exist to-night if you and I were not lovers! It's a part of the plan laid down when God was putting the points on the stars. Deirdre"—he sobered down—"I'm going to forget Hyacinth for a brief space—it's far wiser—give myself up entirely to you. I shall see more clearly bye and bye. With the morning light it will all work out. You know"—his dark eyes twinkled—"we're doing a very mad thing—people would say it was an elopement! Has that ever occurred to you? Aunt Byng would be convinced that the whole scheme was prearranged; and as to our dear Mrs. Gage——"

They laughed simultaneously.

"What a cat that woman is—a tortoise-shell cat who plays tennis! The poor old Rector knows it, too, and is always concealing his scratched hands. I say"—he peered out—"is this the place?" For the omnibus had

swerved round into the short circular drive before the hotel.

"You've got me a room?" as she nodded.

"Yes—with a balcony over the sea."

"Good." They pulled up with a jolt and the driver clambered down from his box.

The night porter welcomed them with a shrewd glance at Mesurier, whose fluent French for a moment deceived him.

"Monsieur has had a stormy crossing?" His voice was blandly sympathetic.

The Squire laughed. "A bit choppy!" and followed Deirdre up the stairs.

"This is your room." She opened the door. "I didn't let them light a fire as I remembered you once said you liked to sleep in a thorough draught!"

"I do. This is first-rate." The porter, attentive, unstrapped his bag. The driver had made him a secret sign to convey the size of Mesurier's tip.

"I will get the soup that Madame ordered." He was off with a sympathetic glance. Himself, he had no illusions. Here was a pair of happy lovers. Married or single—who cared? His Gallic heart warmed towards them.

"I thought you'd be hungry after your journey, so I told them to keep some soup for you. It's only *potage à l'oseille*—I hope you like it?" Her face was anxious.

"Rather! What fun—another picnic—and French bread!" He spoke like a school-boy. "I say, don't go! Be a dear and unlock my bag. Here are the keys." He tossed them across. "And bundle things out whilst I wash my hands." He flung off his coat and turned up his cuffs. "Not the first time, my dear, you've seen me in my shirt sleeves."

Deirdre laughed. "Not exactly! Here are your slippers." She dragged them forth. "Why, they're full of cigarettes!"

"The old dodge—evading the customs. There ought to be a hair-brush somewhere. Sure you don't mind unpacking for me? It's so delicious having you do it."

She nodded, amused by his energy.

"Here's the sponge bag—you'll want the soap." He caught it neatly.

"And a book—verses." She turned the title page.

"Yes. I put it in for you."

This thought for her, at such a moment, when his daughter was missing, faced with disaster, filled Deirdre with wonder, a side-light on his love for her.

"I think that when one is in pain books are the surest anæsthetic. Just turn to that marked page." He was drying his face, his voice half-smothered. "Read it out——"

She found the place and, squatting back upon her heels before the half-emptied bag, obeyed him with a half smile.

"Though living give my faith the lie,  
Though loving clip the wings of love,  
Though men humanity disprove,  
Though all my sins and moons go out,  
Though tongues of all the ages shout  
That only death may not deceive—  
I'll not believe! I'll not believe!" \*

"D'you like that?" Mesurier asked.

"Yes—it's fine!—so full of courage."

"A sturdy faith—good to hold in this half-hearted material world."

The porter was tapping at the door.

"The soup is served in Madame's room before the fire." He stood there smiling. "Is there anything more that Monsieur desires?"

"Only this." Rollo dived into his pocket and held out a coin. "I'll be glad to get rid of this cart wheel."

"*Merci bien!*" The porter grinned. "*Et bonne nuit, monsieur et dame.*"

"A neat way out of it." Rollo laughed as the door closed. "He does *hope* we're not married—you can see it in the rascal's eye! Now"—he brushed back his hair—"I'm ready for our picnic, dear." He paused, one

\* By Irene Rutherford McLeod.

arm thrust into his coat. "Do you remember Merlin's Spell?"

"No."

"Liar!"

She twisted round, her face warm and mischievous. "But I couldn't forget the way you snored! It shook the leaves off the beech tree!"

"I hope it won't shake the hotel to-night! Are you next door?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Come along—that soup will be cold."

Aware of his suddenly thoughtful glance, she led the way and opened the door between the two rooms, her step assured. The warm glow of the wood fire greeted them invitingly.

"I say, this is jolly!" He followed her, his quick eyes taking in the feminine touch of the little slippers beneath the chair and the soft dressing-gown flung across it.

The intimate sense of being there, alone in the night with the woman he loved, kept him silent for a moment, conscious of her perfect trust.

Divining something of his mood, she sat down at the round table laid for two and became the hostess.

"Now then—grace first!"

To her surprise he obeyed promptly.

"For these and all Thy other blessings——" His voice sank in a reverent whisper.

"That should fly direct to Heaven, for it came from the depths of my being." He laid a hand for a second on hers. "I *am* grateful—please believe me."

He saw that Deirdre was moved and his manner changed.

"Soup, please." He held out his plate greedily. "And wine, ye gods!—red wine of France."

She gave him a generous helping of both and another memory flashed across her.

"*'Le petit vin de chez nous'*"—

He caught her up in his ringing voice—"'*est chose légère*'—at least we'll hope so! What would you do, Deirdre, if I were overcome by it?"



"Ring up the night porter." The practical answer tickled him.

"What an end to his romance! And ours?" He looked at her curiously.

"I don't think so. I could forgive a man for one foolish outbreak. One can't expect them to be perfect."

Rollo was much amused.

"I don't think I've ever been drunk—not even in my college days. There's no excuse for it, you see. I happen to have a strong head. People rarely consider that fact sufficiently. I've known a man quite futile and incoherent on two modest whiskies and sodas." He raised his glass as he spoke. "To the dearest woman whom God has made!" and drank it off, his eyes closed.

"They forget that the vine is His handicraft as well as the thistle," he drifted on. "It's odd how the 'unco guid' persist in hunting for thorns beneath the roses. Now here are we, philosophers, realizing that though the best—the very best—is denied to us, there's an amazing gift of beauty, of sympathy and happiness, offered freely, if we will take it.

"But few women could understand the difference, in the way you do, between sinning against convention and lowering one's own ideals. Thank God, you're different—a part of myself in some subtle way. I've never been closer to you, my sweet, than I am to-night, sitting here."

It seemed to her that his gipsy face was transformed for a moment, a light behind shining through the brilliant eyes, and a strange fear shot across her. So a dying man might look on the woman he loved for the last time.

She threw off the queer foreboding.

"I'm happy, too," she answered simply, "storing golden memories—'memories like almighty wine.' Do you remember the Henley you gave me?"

"Yes, another link in the chain. This Summer—what a resurrection of youth and hope and a man's longing! And I'm close on forty," he added abruptly.

"Well?" She smiled at this afterthought.

"Oh, just a case of Henley again—

"Shall we not take the ebb who had the flow?  
Life was our friend. Now if it be our foe—  
Dear, though it spoil and break us!—need we care  
What is to come?"

"Deirdre"—he leaned forward—"I think you've given me to-night the purest hour of happiness I have ever known. Whatever comes, remember this—will you, sweet?"

He read the answer in her eyes and returned to his old laughing manner.

"Will you hand me the Judgment of Paris—or Puy?—wherever that apple was grown!"

For the inevitable dish of dry and wizened hotel fruit had been added as a decoration.

"I mayn't care for the flavour"—he bit it with his strong white teeth—"but there's something alluring in the scrunch. Have one?"

She shook her head.

His glance travelled on to the clock.

"I say, is that the time? You poor child, you must be tired!"

"I'm not. I had a good sleep before I came to meet you—this morning!"

"Well, just a last cigarette and then good night."

He rose and, pushing back the table, drew the chairs close to the fire.

"In another hour it will be daylight. Do you ever hear from your godmother now?"

"What put her into your head?"

"Just offering you a cigarette. I remember I made it an excuse to detain you a minute that day at lunch. Did you guess that I loved you then?"

"No." She looked a shade surprised.

"Well, here's another simple proof." He slipped his fingers into his pocket and produced a penny. "Remember this?"

"It's not the one I gave you myself—when you said 'Ma'am'?" She laughed shyly.

"Yes—the boldly claimed backsheesh. Turn it over." He watched her, amused.

Deeply scored across the face of the finest king that England has known was a date early in July.

"I always keep it, as my mascot."

He threw the end of the cigarette into the fire.

"Dear—it's time—bed-time. You're looking tired."

He was on his feet, with a smothered sigh.

"Thank the stars, we've got to-morrow! I wonder——" He bent down to her. "*Could* you—would you think it right . . . ?"

Instinctively she drew back; the slightest movement, but he saw it.

He straightened himself, his hands clenched.

"No! Forgive me." He tried to smile. "Better not. I understand."

He stepped stiffly towards the door, fighting down his sudden longing.

"Good night—sleep well."

She started up, conscious at last of her silence and the pain on his face.

"Rollo—stop! One moment." Her voice shook. "If you—*really* want . . ."

He managed a laugh.

"Want's not in it! All the same—bless you, darling."

The door closed sharply behind him.

She heard the bolt driven home; too disturbed to realise the futility of the precaution, though later on it made her smile.

For a moment she battled hard against the swift temptation to call him back. But wisdom prevailed. She would but add to the bitterness of separation by the generous impulse that stirred her now.

She began to undress noiselessly, wondering if he understood that no lack of love had held her back, but a scrupulous instinct. She felt unhappy. Then through the thin partition she heard him start to whistle softly and her face cleared.

The thud of his boots echoed in the corridor as he set them down outside his door. And still the piping

air danced on, clear and sweet as a blackbird's note, with something of the woodland in it, and ended on a little trill. Deirdre smiled as she turned out the light. Rollo would always understand.

## CHAPTER XXXI

CARADOC drove up in a cab to the *Château de Puy* at twelve o'clock.

He looked pale, but alert and handsome, slightly aloof from his surroundings, with his ultra-British air, suggesting amused pity for foreign lands.

The usual reaction from violent wrath had set in during the night, assisted later by a dish of his favourite "*oeufs Meyerbeer*." For he disdained a French breakfast, clinging to his native habits.

He felt calm and confident, master of the situation, inclined to admire secretly the magnanimity of his mood.

His wife should have every chance of clearing her threatened reputation. He was willing to listen to excuses—however Bohemian they might be—for this furtive visit to Dieppe. He would hear her out with manly forbearance.

But of course it gave him the whip hand. This was balm to his hurt pride.

He flicked a minute speck of dust off his sleeve as he paid the driver—awkwardly, with his left arm—and adjusted the sling which held his right.

The man clamoured for further *pourboire*. Caradoc, no master of French, disdaining him, strode into the building whilst the driver informed a passing acquaintance that, "Here was a one who for two *sous* would sell the eyebrows off his mistress!"

The bureau was empty. Caradoc moved on to the long *salle à manger*, where a couple of tables were laid for lunch, the rest stacked behind a screen. No waiter could be seen; the place seemed devoid of life.

He retraced his steps as he noticed the *fiacre* pass with a last crack of a whip and a shrill curse, and striding out through the silent hall pulled the front-door bell.

After a moment a porter appeared, hurriedly struggling into his coat.

"Are you all dead and buried here?" Caradoc asked impatiently.

"*Mais non, monsieur, mille pardons!*" Flustered, the porter replied in French, then relapsed into broken English. "Monsieur, no doubt, will understand we are all underneath upside! This tragedy——" He threw out his hands dramatically. "To bathe—this weather! What a madness!—in November—whoever dreamed of such a folly? The manager has gone to Dieppe to inform the police—he is '*bouleversé*'—what you call 'roll-over'? The first time such a thing had happened—and no one's fault. Monsieur understands? For, see you—the boat was dragged down as soon as *le petit* brought the alarm. But the boatman could not be found at once. In the season he would be rowing about with a good strong rope—every precaution—but——"

Caradoc cut him short.

"I don't follow. Has some one been drowned?"

"Assuredly. Has not monsieur heard? See—there, upon the beach—that little crowd." He pointed it out. "They are watching the water and Jean in his boat. But the good God alone knows when the body will be found! The current is strong beyond the bay. It may be swept as far as Dieppe—further—be washed ashore at Pourville—or caught in the cliffs. What a misfortune! And the poor lady so devoted—one can see that in the wink of an eye—and only arrived by the night boat. . . . It is enough to desolate you!"

"The night boat?" Caradoc stared. "What was the name?" His voice was sharp.

"*Tiens!* The porter clutched his brow with a grimy hand. "*Il m'échappe!* A curious one, hardly English. . . ."

"Mesurier?"

"*Ça y est!*"

"Good Lord!" Caradoc flinched. The man looked at him curiously.

"Monsieur perhaps was a friend?"

Caradoc's face, with an effort, went blank.

"I knew him slightly." His voice was indifferent. "Look here, can you get me a drink? I should like a glass of French beer and there don't seem to be any waiters." He wanted time to digest the news.

"At once!" But the porter lingered. "If monsieur will enter the *salle à manger*." He held back the swinging door. "There is a fire—it is more cheerful. *Voilà!* Would monsieur like *le Matin?*"

Caradoc took a seat at a table that commanded a view of the hall outside, and shook off the voluble creature.

Here was a pretty kettle of fish, and where on earth was Dierdre?

A dishevelled waiter brought him his "bock." The beer was good and his spirits lightened. But he did not like to ask for his wife; it would mean awkward explanations. Presumably the hall porter took her for Mesurier's? He scowled at this unpleasant thought, but remembered "the poor devil" was dead.

This placed things on a different footing, removing the cause of the scandal. Deirdre now would be alone, and he had not fancied tackling the Squire.

She would be thankful to return and claim the protection of a husband—provided, of course, she could explain what had brought her to Puy on this mad adventure.

He began to picture the coming scene, his wife's despair and gratitude.

"I shan't make it too hard for her," he informed a cupid on the ceiling as he leaned back in his chair and lit a Turkish cigarette. "What we want is to hush things up. I must take her home by the next boat. Lucky the flat's all in order—very effective that blue paper Madame Svendsen insisted upon. Deirdre will feel ashamed when she sees all I've done for her." His mind moved forward, counting expenses. "Yes, she's pretty well off now; she ought to give me a helping hand—entertain a little, too. I'm sick of those long dull evenings."

Then he saw her cross the hall. Her motor veil was drawn down over her face, shrouding her, and she moved quickly, avoiding attention.

"Now's my chance," thought Caradoc. He watched her start to mount the stairs and followed, noiseless, in her wake.

She paused to hunt for the key in her bag outside her door and he drew nearer. As she opened it and turned to remove the key she found her husband before her.

"*You!*" Horror was in her voice. He took it immediately for guilt.

"Yes. You weren't expecting me?" He pushed past her into the room, aware of her movement to close the door.

Deirdre stood there irresolute. She glanced down the corridor like a trapped creature seeking escape.

"Now, my dear"—at her evident fright he felt master of the case—"just come in and sit down and we'll talk things over quietly."

"Not *here!*" She shrank back. This room so full of memories! Then her courage rose supreme. "You have no right to intrude like this and force yourself on to me!"

He smiled at her indulgently.

"Come, come—you're overwrought. And the servants will hear you." He closed the door, laying a hand on her arm to prevent active opposition.

She flinched, moving away from his touch, and this stung his vanity.

"Surely you don't want *further* scandal? As to rights, I'm your husband, although you seem to forget the fact."

"No." She faced him soberly. "I forget nothing—not even your words when you told me to 'go and *stay* away'! I remember everything you said." (He could see now, through her veil, her strained expression and her pallor, the blue eyes dulled by tears.) "But, if you've any decency, you will leave me alone at a moment like this."

Caradoc shuffled on his feet. It was not so easy as he had imagined.

"I can understand that you're upset." He thought it wiser to overlook her reference to the old quarrel. "It's



a nasty business altogether. The shock—Mesurier—” He cleared his throat. “Still, it seems to me that I can help—if you’ll only listen to advice! The very fact that I’m here with you should put an end to unpleasantness. No one need know when I arrived.” He felt proud of himself.

She stared at him.

“Oh . . . I see. It’s the thought of scandal.” She bit her lip. Then to his utter horror she laughed.

“I’m past worrying over that.”

“Are you? Upon my soul! You seem to take it pretty coolly. I find you here—all alone—without your maid”—his temper was rising—“spending the night at an hotel with Mesurier. A nice story!”

His voice took on a hectoring note. “Why did you come here? What is this ‘business’? If you’d tell me that—honestly—I should find it easier to forgive you.”

Deirdre thought rapidly. Her one idea was to be alone; to end this scene, get rid of Mark. And yet—she could not betray the girl. Though Hyacinth had declared herself an enemy—and even now, in the shock of her father’s pitiful death, refused to see Deirdre—she would not confide another’s secret to save her threatened reputation.

“I can’t explain. It’s a private matter.”

“Private!” Caradoc’s face grew red. “Pretty public, I should say. What must they think in this hotel?”

Unluckily his restless eyes fell on the narrow door between the two rooms. It lay ajar, disclosing a bag and scattered clothes of an obviously masculine description.

“I believe you were in love with the fellow. Damn him!”

Deirdre’s blue eyes blazed. How dare he vent his spleen on the dead?

“Yes, I was—heart and soul!”

Caradoc flinched as though she had struck him.

“And you dare to stand there and confess it!” He was spluttering now. “You’re off your head!”

“No, I’m telling you the truth. You asked for it.” She felt no pity, only a sort of outraged wonder. She saw he believed the worst of her.

"If I had been—*what you imagine*, do you think he would be dead now? That I should have let him attempt to bathe in this weather, with such a sea?"

Caradoc gulped this down in silence. Like all bullies, he was a coward and her resolute front was weakening him. There might be logic in what she said?

"Oh, I see!" He capitulated. "Since that's how—er—matters stand—and I think you've got a dashed good husband to take your simple word for it—I'm willing to forget and forgive, and get you out of this beastly scrape." He had almost persuaded himself meantime that her remark about loving Rollo was nothing more than hysteria. Perhaps there had been a "sort of flirtation"? His conscience was not entirely easy concerning his friend, Madame Svendson.

She gave him an odd little smile. It seemed to her she was looking on at a scene played by other people—that this was no concern of hers, an outside proposition.

After the agony of the morning her senses were numbed; life itself was a dream—a pitiful mockery. All she prayed for was solitude.

"I think you really mean to be kind"—she spoke in a queer detached voice—"but it comes too late to touch me now. I've done with the old years of bondage."

She gave herself a little shake as though to stir her drowsy wits. "I've given you freely all my youth: lived for you—worked for you—and never made you contented yet, nor brought happiness into our lives. And now"—she leaned against the bed, a hand gripping the brass rail—"I only ask for a little peace—to be alone—forget . . . remember. . . . You can't possibly want me back. I've never suited you in the least. I'm not the type of woman you care for, or ever *could* understand. You asked for freedom—you let me go. You've nearly crushed the spirit in me and ruined my health with your temper. Why should we risk all that again?"

"But—dash it all, Deirdre!—don't you care for me at all?" His face was an almost comical mixture of disbelief and wounded pride.

"No, it's gone." Her voice was faint; the room swam

before her eyes. Caradoc's sudden movement brought her back to a sense of realities, for his anger had slipped its frail leash. He moved towards her threateningly.

"I never heard such damned nonsense! I've married you and you're my wife, and, if you don't come back to me, by Heaven you shall pay for it! Do you think I'm going to let you make a public laughing-stock of me—run about all over the place with any man who takes your fancy? I'm not such a fool as all that! I'll give you now a last chance. *Will* you return—or will you not?"

"No." She began to loosen her veil with a feeling of suffocation.

"Then, by God, I'll divorce you! You can't get away from the law of England—and *legally* you're a guilty woman. Every lawyer would bear me out."

She threw back the stifling gauze. No fear was in her face, but a curious wonder flitted across the deep lines left by pain.

"Do you think I am guilty?" Her voice was still.

For a moment he stared deep in her eyes. Then, mad with temper, he sneered:

"I think you're a damned fine actress!"

He saw her reel and catch her breath. Colour invaded her pale cheek.

"Ah! . . ." She gripped at the friendly rail, controlling herself by an effort of will.

"And you'll live to regret it!" He started to bluster, aware of her weakness, but feeling the spur of his native cruelty driving him on to trample on a fallen foe.

Then he started and glanced behind him. For a second he felt as though a breath of cold air had blown across him. Deirdre's eyes were fixed ahead, her lips parted, but no words came.

He stepped back nervously, his anger ebbing, and made for the door, but paused irresolute on the threshold.

"Deirdre . . . ?" His voice shook. But she neither moved nor turned her head.

"Oh, very well!" He shrugged his shoulders. "You'll hear from me—through the lawyers!"

As the door slammed after him she slipped down to the floor, unconscious.

## CHAPTER XXXII

THE wind had sunk and with it the swell of the long rollers. Now the sea lay tranquil, bathed in an amethyst glow, save for a pathway of faëry gold that led from the bay, where the shadows lengthened, to the half-closed doorway of the sun.

The dark horizon cut across the lower curve of his shining face, and the last cries of the sea-gulls rose, piercing and restless, sharply discordant.

Deirdre, crouching over the fire, thought that they wailed for the death of Rollo; his beautiful body, so full of life, now cold and stark on the bed of the sea.

Where had he gone? To that "afterwards" on which he had counted so serenely; a land of spirits where Time and Space were merged into Eternity, waiting, full of the knowledge withheld from earthly existence, to welcome her, to be at one for evermore?

Or just wiped out—waste matter!

She shivered, stretching out her hands to the flickering logs, aware that here she had reached the limit of lonely pain. Nothing could be worse than this; not even the chill of dissolution.

Youth lay behind her, dead; love—a memory!—snatched away before it bore the flower of fulfilment; honour—that fruit of Autumn days—withered and trampled underfoot.

A gull circled close to the window and dipped again into the bay, which echoed back its mournful cry. Rollo was dead—all Nature wept. Rollo with his faun-like grace, his brilliant eyes and mocking smile, his chivalry and tenderness. Rollo—the dream and the attainment!

A little splutter of gas broke out from a charred log where a spark alighted. She watched it, half hypnotised. Here was a spirit of dead trees; a flame without a material substance, yet visible, full of warmth. Whence had

it come? What law of life had formed its existence, kindled it?

Nature? No. Nature herself was subject to the elements. God, then?—she caught her breath—the All-Creator, Lord of the Winds, controlling the Stars and the fruitful Earth, speeding the Spirits forth at birth, gathering them in at the harvest of death.

A curious exaltation seized her. Why did she doubt? That potent force, which had framed and controlled the universe by the "laws of balance" that Rollo had preached, could not be moved by the will of man from the chosen means to the plan's perfection. No human sorrow, no pang of loss could weigh the scales of eternal justice, but "afterwards"—who could say?—might there not be some recompense for fidelity and high endeavour? Would they not meet—she and Rollo?

Yes, assuredly, in the spirit.

And if so—she smiled faintly—how short was the span of life before her! Better by far that this should come in Autumn with only the Winter ahead than sap the peace of her early Spring and prolong the lonely pilgrimage.

But meanwhile she must fill the gap; find relief in active work. Since she herself was beyond help, extend it to suffering humanity and use the new understanding that broadened her heart's sympathies.

How? Her chin sank down on her hand, the tear-dimmed eyes were full of thought.

Mark? She tried to see clearly. Why attempt a hopeless task? If Mark after twelve years of marriage, of endless striving, and wasted love, of utmost fidelity on her part, could at the first breath of suspicion label her as a light woman—No! her influence was gone.

And Hyacinth?

A bitter throb of pain made her weary eyelids droop. Rollo's own flesh and blood, his life work—his last bequest.

But Hyacinth had turned against her.

Wearily she went back through the events of that tragic day, and the sweet awakening with the light to find his note on the polished boards, slipped beneath the

bolted door; those words which lay against her heart, a last message from the dead.

"Dearest:

"I'm going down to bathe. Clear sunshine, the sea's calling. This is only a scribbled line of love to wish you good-morning in case you should wake and do the same, then wonder at my churlish silence.

"I can't resist those dancing waves, but I won't linger with the naiads. There's a strong attraction on the shore—a woodland nymph with violet eyes.

"Would you come for an early walk—a last hour of holiday before we settle to our work and the fate of Aucassin and Nicolette? '*Tant par est douce*' . . . you remember that? We shall have to scheme, you and I. Chris has earned his heart's desire; I see that very clearly.

"So hey! for a battle with Convention. I've no pity for the wife. It's the law of balance. She won by a trick, and it always turns against the knave. But we'll have to straighten Hyacinth's tangle. I can't have one scandalous breath dim the glory of her hair. He must wait and win her soberly—another test for our pair of lovers!

"I suppose I'm not the sanest of parents? That bug-bear 'divorce' is a myth to me. They were never married—as I see it—just linked by the foolish laws of man.

"It's against my whole creed of life that Chris should suffer for her fault, to the end of the chapter, without respite. It suggests an utter lack of proportion.

"Turn it over in your brain—that clever woman's brain of yours—sharpened by instinct, the precious gift that God gives to all mothering creatures.

"Dare I quote Browning to you? Browning, so sadly out of fashion for fluffy poets who prate of sin as a new pleasure—unexplored! For

"I must feel your brain prompt mine  
Your heart anticipate my heart,  
You must be just before, in fine  
See and made me see, for your part  
New depths of the Divine!"

Oh, my sweet, it's so perfect! To know you are near me, sleeping there. I've never closed my eyes all night, picturing you with your dear dark hair flung across the white pillow, one rounded cheek, flushed with sleep, and the wistful curves of your long lashes.

"Deirdre, shall I ever forget how you looked that night in the moonlit woods? Browning knew the spell of the trees—he voices my thoughts in the same poem:

"The forests had done it; there they stood—  
We caught for a second the powers at play:  
They had mingled us so, for once and for good,  
Their work was done—we might go or stay,  
They relapsed to their ancient mood."

"Dear, I could write to you for ever! But the longer I wait the longer the hours, or minutes—which is it to be?—before I see you face to face.

"I would so like to steal tiptoe and kiss you once before you wake. But I won't. You're wise—we'll store our treasures. I can only pray you are dreaming of  
"ROLLO."

She read the loving lines once more and rebellion seized her—a sharp regret. Why had she wasted that golden hour—bidden him even a parting kiss? Never yet had their lips met. . . .

And for *this* Caradoc would divorce her!

Was there any justice in heaven—any limit to man's folly?

One thing alone could save her honour: treachery to Hyacinth. At this she straightened her slim shoulders. Never! She would not stoop to it.

Back went her drifting thoughts to the early tragedy of the morning.

She had moved to the window, letter in hand, and gazed out over the sunlit sea. There was no sign of Mesurier; only an urchin, who ran, barefoot, up the road towards the hotel.

Disappointed she had turned to ring for hot water; once, twice, then at last had opened her door to gaze down the empty passage.



The chambermaid had appeared, breathless.

"*Pardon, madame—mais—quel malheur!*" Out it came, a voluble story of hopeless disaster, excitement and pity.

They were hunting for Jean to launch the boat. "What a madness!—to bathe in November! *Le petit* had watched *monsieur* swim, far out, diving beneath the big waves, and then, *mon Dieu!*—it must have been the cramp that seized him——"

What followed seemed strangely blurred until she had found herself at the villa and guessed at the sight of Pontefract's face that the ill news had preceded her.

Hyacinth, mad with grief, had refused to see Deirdre, or admit her to the room where she lay, face downwards, on her bed.

The one glimmer of light through the gloom had been the attitude of Chris, pitiful and warmed by respect. He had faced the necessary business with a dogged grip of the situation: all that aftermath of death which seems so utterly unimportant to those left in that workaday world which ignores their trouble and still rolls on.

"I thought it through before you came." His hazel eyes had been heavily shadowed. "We won't wire Mrs. Byng before ten. It will give us time. She can't come till the midnight boat. We must get Hyacinth to the hotel and pretend she's been there from the start—better, you know, for both of you. The manager will hold his tongue. It's a bad enough business as it is! He'll be thinking about his next season and—er—you know—the bathing crowd." He had gulped in his throat and gone on: "You were on your way to Paris, see? Put in at Puy for a short visit—*my* suggestion. Lord!" he had groaned. "What a thundering pack of lies! Did Rollo know?—understand how it all happened?" His voice had been hoarse.

"Yes." She had roused herself at this, touched by the man's anxiety. "He blessed you for all your care of her. Called you again 'Dear old Chris'."

Pontefract turned away, his eyes dimmed. "Thank God! I loved the chap—couldn't help it." He had stretched out a blind hand to her. "It's the limit—

isn't it, my dear? And—I'm so damned sorry for you!"

"*Don't!*" She had clung to his warm clasp and felt a brotherly arm thrown round her quivering shoulders, steadying her.

"Look here! You must *buck up!* Won't do. I know you've grit. And there's Hyacinth——" A pause. "Let's get on with this beastly business!"

So they had gone at it again: the telegrams to London and Weavers, and the details of his hurried scheme to protect the name of the girl he loved.

"You mustn't misjudge her. She'll come round." But his gloomy face had belied the words. "She doesn't know what she's about. I daren't leave her for very long." He had glanced at the door anxiously. "Can you send these wires from the hotel?" She had nodded. "I'd best sign them myself." He had added apologetically: "I wish I could be of more use, but you see exactly how I'm placed?"

"Yes, of course. You must stay with her. I'll return here—about eleven. And . . . *thank* you." She had held out her hand. Chris had gripped it painfully.

"Come at once if there's any trouble. Don't let any one bother you." He had hesitated, plainly nervous. "Have you told them the name and address and—all that?"

"Yes, of course!" Her eyes had widened. "Oh, I see"—a wan smile—"they know that he was only a friend. I made no mystery about it."

"Why should you?" He met her half-way. "It's as right as houses, I know that." Then he had coloured violently, "I mean, of course, it's obvious," and had gone on very quickly, "and, look here—don't see reporters or police officials of any sort. Pack them off—down to me. I'll settle 'em—and pretty quick! Try and get a little rest. You'll want it, you know, bye and bye. I'll tackle Mrs. Byng myself—be there to meet her at Dieppe. Provided"—his face had clouded again—"that Hyacinth——"

She had nodded gravely.

"Chris, don't press the child to see me. So long as she comes to the hotel. She can go to bed at once, you

know, and remain there." Her lips had quivered. "She needn't really meet me at all. I can steal away by the morning boat. That is, if she doesn't want me."

"She does." He had lied like a gentleman. "It's only she's off her head just now. I thought the shock would have finished her!—the worst half hour of my life. But when she comes to her senses, you'll see."

They had slipped quietly down the passage and into the pitiless gay sunshine. He had not the courage to tell her the truth: that Hyacinth in her passionate grief and rebellion had blamed Deirdre and had used as her final argument, when Chris had urged her to forgive, the theory that if the former had "only been loyal" and stayed in town Rollo would not have followed her. She would not listen to Pontefract's solemn assurance that he had known in any case that Mesurier would arrive at the Villa Nicolette.

She had sat up in bed with tragic eyes and had thrust aside his loving arms.

"You, too! I suppose you admire her? She steals Rollo away from me, and then——" Another spasm of tears.

For this was her first great sorrow. In all her sheltered sunny life she had never faced the fact of death. Youth and love were to her immortal. Happiness—Rollo's creed—had been the ultimate goal of life. Nothing had strengthened her soul to meet the cruel blow before it fell.

Deirdre had pondered on this, as she dragged her heavy limbs along the dusty lane to the hotel, little divining that there lay a further trial awaiting her, in the shape of Caradoc.

After his dramatic exit, the chambermaid, bustling in with some clean towels, had found her stretched in a dead faint upon the floor. With the practical kindness of her race, Marie had restored the sufferer without summoning outside help, and, better still, without futile questions.

Madame was prostrate with the shock—and so brave—one saw that! Had madame considered in her trouble that it was past the luncheon hour? The *bon Dieu* knew

it was hard to eat when the heart escaped you. But if madame would leave it to her? *Bon!* She had bustled out of the room. There had followed a colloquy with the waiter. Later a tray had changed hands and Marie had skilfully lit the fire with the help of her friends, the fragrant fir cones, keeping meanwhile a watchful eye on her patient to see that the food went down.

The motherly voice had proved a tonic and Deirdre had admired the tact with which Marie had avoided all symptom of curiosity regarding the lady's presence there and her connection with Mesurier: what Rollo had called "the Latin touch," which combined a shrewd knowledge of life with a sympathy for all forms of error arising not from the head but the heart.

She guessed that the woman looked on her as Rollo's mistress—no more, no less; but her cloak of charity was not edged with the border of the Pharisee.

Here was a sister in sore trouble. She left her soul to the Almighty and ministered to the spent body with the sure instinct of the peasant.

Refreshed and calmed Deirdre had returned to the Villa Nicolette to spend a furtive anxious hour, whilst Chris, in vain, had tried to persuade the girl upstairs to listen to reason.

For Hyacinth refused to move. She would "stay with Chris." This was her verdict. In vain he pointed out to her that it meant the ruin of their hopes.

She only clung the closer to him. Deirdre she declined to see.

Rollo was dead—she had "only Chris!" What did it matter what people said? They were "superior to the world." If Chris left her— He guessed the rest. Youth indulges in morbid extremes and easily hints at self-destruction.

She drove the man to the verge of distraction; angered him, then won him back through the passionate love he bore for her by her childish caresses and poignant grief.

He had come downstairs white and broken.

"No go!" He had poured himself out a drink with

a hand that shook like a leaf. Deirdre had steadied the glass. Pitiful, she saw that the strain was sapping his strength and his earlier purpose.

"If it comes to the worst I shall see it through—bolt with her! What else can I do? Keep her here to be torn to pieces by Aunt Byng when she arrives? She's got the law on her side, too; can carry the girl away with her. And picture the life she'd lead her then. It's unthinkable!—worse than prison." He had sat there, holding his head. "What the devil am I to do?"

A telegraph boy had topped the bank. Pontefract had flung out to meet him, returning his face less gloomy.

"Not coming till to-morrow—the Byngs, I mean. It gives us a chance. Let me think——"

She had interrupted.

"In that case, I've an idea. I can sleep here on the sofa. Hyacinth needn't know. We can explain to Mrs. Byng that she fled away from the hotel and you gave up the villa to us. She couldn't bear it—not after——" She had paused, leaving the phrase unfinished.

"That's it! Let's get it complete. I stayed on, after all, as she was ill and might want the doctor. No one can object to that. Although Meg"—in his relief a suppressed laugh had escaped his lips—"won't believe a single word! She was always jealous of you at Weavers! Kept a wily eye on me for fear of my coming to pay toll."

At the old familiar joke, Deirdre, in a sudden flash, had seen the picture before her eyes: the cottage with its homely porch and latticed windows that breathed of peace. . . .

She had risen with a feeling of panic.

"Then I'll go, for a time." Pontefract, preoccupied by his own scheme, had let her out.

With the memory of Four Corners haunting her like a Summer ghost, between the bare boughs of the trees fringing the road, she had stumbled along.

Had she really lived through those long hours of heedless content—with the flowers and the sun?—drowsed in the orchard until Day's step summoned her in to her frugal meals?

Day! Could she send for her? What a comfort she would be. Then she remembered the maid's trouble. No, she must put the thought away.

Was there no one else in the world?

Cousin Maddie? Impossible. The wide ocean lay between them. She must bear her own burden alone.

She had passed swiftly through the hall, avoiding the clerk's watchful eye, and gaining her room had locked the door and there like a phantom that fades when faced she had thrust Four Corners away from her—with all its perilous memories. . . .

On the table where her tray had lain was a handful of violets closely tied—a little bunch *à deux sous* propped up in her bedroom tumbler.

This was Marie—her only friend. She bent closer. They held no scent.

"It's like my life," was her bitter thought; "nothing remains—not even a perfume!"

Suddenly she threw her arms out to the sea:

"Oh, Rollo—*Rollo!*"

No answer came; only the cry of the gulls circling above the water.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

THE sun slipped down into the waves, and speedily, with no afterglow, the swift twilight of November blotted out the dim horizon. The tide, turning, began to steal across the line of stranded seaweed and the gulls scattered to seek their haunts in the holes of the cliff; all was still.

Deirdre, rousing from her dreams, laid another log on the fire, then sank back into her old position, allowing her thoughts to wander afield.

Where would she go when Hyacinth had been reclaimed by Mrs. Byng?

Back to Weavers? Without Rollo! She shrank from the thought of those shadowy trees—witnesses of her happiness—and the garden he had planned for her. At the mercy, too, of the village tongues, to wait for Caradoc's revenge and the public shame of her divorce.

No; her sanctuary was shattered.

Brighton?—her mother? Worse still! She smiled at the bare idea; a pale smile without mirth. She knew full well what awaited her there.

Again, like a kindly hand outstretched, came the memory of Cousin Maddie—the dear, impulsive, loving soul with the *esprit de corps* of American woman. Surely there she could find comfort, understanding and sympathy.

Could she tear herself away from England and seek a new life in the States? And would Day come with her? She clung to Day as a last hope.

She had heard that divorce in America was viewed in a more kindly spirit: that her sex held an equal right to be freed without humiliation. Marriage was not one law for man and another for woman; the Gordian knot could be cut before the latter stooped to dishonour through sheer desperation.

Cousin Maddie, knowing Mark, would find every excuse for her. And yet——

A faint doubt arose; she remembered the warnings down at Weavers; her godmother's shrewd distrust of the Squire and the motives that underlay his friendship.

Instantly her loyalty was on the alert. She would not fly in her last extremity to one who could cast the slightest blame on Rollo! She could see the delicate piquante face, with its aureole of snow-white hair and the youthful eyes—restless, clever—their shrewd, unfaltering outlook on life. She could not hide this Autumn passion from the experience of Winter, and it seemed to threaten her last treasure: the sacred memories she stored.

Thank God she had not told him!

The thought flashed across her now that Rollo had gone to meet his death unaware of her decision; loving her, trusting her, believing that they should come together once the parting with her husband had become an irrevocable fact.

She tried to force herself to admit that this cruel blow held a subtle mercy, dividing her sharply from her lover without the long strain that life, apart from each other, would surely have proved. But her honesty rejected the notion. Better by far admit the gulf, and know him a living breathing soul, awake like herself to a gleam of hope—that pale lamp of humanity—than passed beyond the sound of her voice into the eternal silence.

Somewhere below came the ring of a bell and the grating wheels of the omnibus, then the heavy thud of luggage bumped down on the steps. A belated traveller, no doubt, halting midway upon his journey and choosing the quiet little spot for the sake of an earlier memory, or with an eye to the Summer ahead, instead of a choice of hotels at Dieppe.

Deirdre listened for a moment with a sudden dread of Mrs. Byng. No, it was a man's voice, rather staccato, obviously French. A door opened and was slammed; steps receded down the passage.

The unwonted stir sent her back to the old problem—her own departure.



Where should she turn on reaching London, when her luggage had been hurriedly gleaned from the dainty room in Deanery Street? She could not remain for long in town exposed to Mark's insolence.

Italy? The thought stirred her with memories of her happy girlhood.

Become a wanderer on the earth? One of those faded, silent women, who flit from *pension* to hotel, familiar to the traveller in Southern lands where food is cheap: a woman with a history, curiously shunned by her country-people.

Could she afford to keep Day? She made a rapid calculation. Better a garret in the sunshine if Day would share it than lonely exile.

Ah! If only Hyacinth would understand and turn to her, life would still hold a blessing—some one to comfort and protect.

Hyacinth—who could have saved her!

Caradoc's case would have broken down; the mere presence of the girl on this perilous visit to Dieppe would have offered a sufficient reason for Deirdre's line of conduct. It would have saved her from public shame and guaranteed to the girl herself the surest means of escape from scandal in her foolish flight to Pontefract.

Restless, Deirdre rose to her feet and crossed again to the window. Out there in the dark night Rollo was lying, gathered close to the pitiless heart of the "great white mother," leaving behind him Hyacinth: the child he loved—his life work—his last bequest to Deirdre.

Should she make a supreme effort to bridge the gulf dividing them, drink to the dregs the cup of shame and throw herself on the girl's mercy, not for her own justification, but to pave the way to an understanding?

Her whole pride rose in revolt, but she faced this last desperate chance.

Chivalry was inherited. A Mesurier could never stoop to a mean injustice, whether the victim were friend or foe. "Fair play" again! And could she by this devious route regain a hold on Hyacinth, content herself to receive pity secretly flavoured with contempt?

Horrible! Yet she fought it out. Dare she attempt

this, for Rollo's sake? Would his spirit understand, rest in peace, aware that his child was safe in the hands of the woman he loved?

She closed the shutters, shivering from the salt-drenched wind that swept the sea, and went back to her old seat, still battling with her pride.

And at last her lips shaped "yes." Here was the ultimate ransom of love. For Rollo's sake she would make him the gift of her self-respect. She could do no more. . . .

Her head sank down upon her hands. And then a fancy came to her. In the hush of the room she felt a new consciousness of spiritual help, as though some loving presence stole close to her side, upholding her.

It was not a touch, but the same sense that a wife may feel as she lies in the dark by the man she loves, lost in dreams; fearful to move and disturb his slumber, but acutely aware that within the reach of her gentle arms is her soul's strength—the sympathy and protection she craves.

Deirdre held her breath, wide-eyed. Was this a first awakening to that "afterwards" that her lover had preached, the light of belief in his keen dark face?

Was his spirit, freed from the flesh, about her still, invisible but earth-bound by a deathless love?

"Rollo!" she whispered through the night.

So utterly absorbed was she, so lost in a vision beyond the edge of material life, that she did not hear the faint opening creak of the door, nor catch a low suppressed sob and again she breathed the beloved name:

"Rollo, dear heart, are you there?"

It seemed to her that a soft sigh fluttered across—then the spell was snapped.

For a piteous voice answered hers:

"Deirdre! I've come back. . . ."

She started. A quick rustle of skirts, and at her feet a slender form was flung down, sobbing, spent, and a golden head was pressed on her knees.

"Hyacinth! Oh, my *child!*"

They clung together, beyond speech. The merciful

tears met and mingled, flooding the bitterness out of their hearts.

But still to Deirdre it seemed that a shadowy third hovered near, at peace with the living and the dead, joining the links one by one.

At last the girl relaxed her hold; the beautiful, disfigured face, blistered with tears of grief and passion, showed dim in the firelight.

"*I couldn't! Rollo*"—she spoke in gasps—"He trusted me! I've left Chris . . . And now," she wailed, "there's only *you*. Will you—take me—back again?"

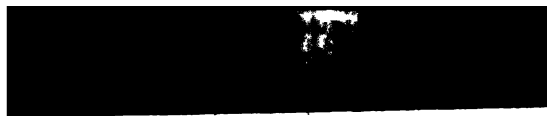
Deirdre could not trust her voice. This was *his* gift—compensation.

She stooped and kissed the wet, salt cheek.

"I'm going—to be good!" sobbed Hyacinth.







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